

1 What is professional communication?

This book aims to provide a comprehensive approach to some of the topics that are captured under the broad umbrella of professional communication, and to discuss some of the current trends in this important field of academic enquiry.

Communication plays a central role in most (if not all) workplaces, and many of the tasks people typically perform in their everyday workplace lives are in one way or another related to communication. This crucial role of communication is particularly obvious in those professional contexts where doing work means doing communication and where tasks are accomplished in and through communicating with clients, colleagues and other professionals. In these professions, which include for example, healthcare, service professions, social work, and many white collar professions, communication is the main tool for getting work done; and telephone calls, faxes, meetings, emails, conference calls, PowerPoint presentations, memos, and the like constitute essential means through which goals are met and work is accomplished. However, even in work settings that are characterised by manual labour, such as the factory floor and many pink-collar professions, communication plays an important role – perhaps less in terms of getting things done but, possibly equally important, in terms of maintaining good relationships with colleagues and clients.

The chapters in this book draw on various authentic examples of communication that occurred in a wide range of workplace contexts, and employ numerous conceptual models developed in different disciplines to illustrate and discuss how some of the complexities of professional communication may be captured and explored in meaningful ways. In approaching the various topics of professional communication, the book mainly takes the perspective of applied linguistics, which is supplemented with theoretical and empirical insights gained in several other disciplines, including communication studies, sociology, anthropology, business and management, organisational sciences and leadership studies.

This first introductory chapter approaches the crucial question of what professional communication is. In line with the three-part structure that characterises this series – starting with problems and

practices, then moving towards interventions and engagements with the problems, to a final theory section – this chapter and all those following are divided into three parts. Section A looks at some examples of communication that occurred in various workplace contexts, and asks whether all these different kinds of communicative exchanges that take place in such a context should be described as professional communication. Section B takes this discussion to the next level by comparing and critically assessing some conceptualisations of professional communication (and related terms). The last section outlines some of the advantages of approaching professional communication from the perspective of applied linguistics, and provides a brief outline of the remaining chapters in the book.

Section A: Examples of professional communication

Example 1.1¹

1. Clara: okay well we might just start without Seth
2. he can come in and can review the minutes from last
3. week
4. Renee: are you taking the minutes this week
5. Clara: no I'm just trying to chair the meeting
6. who would like to take the minutes this week
7. Renee: who hasn't taken the minutes yet
8. Benny: I haven't yet I will
9. Clara: thank you //Benny\
10. Renee: /oh Benny\ takes beautiful minutes too
11. Benny: don't tell them they'll want me doing it every week
[general laughter]
12. Clara: it's a bit of a secret
13. okay shall we kick off and just go round the room
14. um doing an
15. update and then when Seth comes in with the minutes
16. we need to check on any action items from our
17. planning
18. over to you Marlene

Source: Holmes and Stubbe (2003b: 57).

Most people would probably agree that this extract is an example of professional communication: it occurred during the early stages of a meeting in a large commercial organisation. All interlocutors are professionals (that is, they work for this organisation and they get paid for their work), and the topic of their interaction is mostly transactional (work-related) and focuses on establishing who will chair the meeting and take the minutes (since the usual chair is absent). However,

participants also engage in relational talk (that is, in talk that aims at enhancing interpersonal relationships): for example the humour around Benny's minute-taking skills (lines 10–11). The concepts of transactional and relational talk are explained in more detail in Section B. Moreover, there seems to be a power imbalance, with Clara being in a more powerful position (which is, for example, reflected in the observation that she does most of the talking and she is the one to open the meeting (line 13)).

Another relatively typical instance of professional communication is shown in Example 1.2, which is taken from a service encounter at a self-service petrol station. It is a brief interaction between a customer (C) and a shopkeeper (SK). Just before this exchange takes place the customer has served herself some petrol and is now paying at the till.

Example 1.2

1. SK: morning
[the price comes up on the till]
2. SK: that's twenty-two
[C hands over the money]
3. SK: thanks good bye
4. C: Goodbye

Source: Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2006: 81).²

This brief exchange is another good example of professional communication: like in Example 1.1, the interaction takes place at a workplace (a petrol station), and involves not only a professional (the shopkeeper) but also a non-professional (the customer). As Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2006: 81) notes, exchanges like this can be characterised as 'specific work interactions' because only one of the interlocutors (the shopkeeper) is 'at work' while the other is not. There are thus apparently different types of professional communication, including inter-professional interactions, such as those between two professionals as displayed in Example 1.1 and professional–lay interactions, such as the one shown in Example 1.2. These differences are further explored in Section B and in the subsequent chapters.

The overall encounter between the professional and the non-professional in Example 1.2 is rather short, and the topic of the interaction is clearly transactional and includes both verbal and non-verbal elements: it focuses almost exclusively on the exchange of money for the petrol the customer has purchased. The shopkeeper does most of the talking and the customer's only verbal contribution is 'goodbye' in line 4. In this sense, the shopkeeper controls the 'script' or the development of the interaction (see also Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2006). Moreover, both interlocutors seem to have specific roles: the

shopkeeper sells a product while the customer pays for it. Because of these characteristics, it would have probably been possible to guess that this interaction is part of a sales encounter even if no contextual information had been provided (although without any contextual clues it might have been hard to guess that it took place at a petrol station).



Exercise 1.1

Read Example 1.3a and discuss whether you would classify it as professional communication, and why.

Example 1.3

Subject: Coffee?

I am for coffee (and sandwiches!) outside in the sun in about 30 minutes or so – anybody want to join?

Anna

This email has been included here to illustrate that not all workplace interaction is necessarily transactionally focused and strictly outcome-oriented. Rather, more relational aspects may be equally important in some interactions that take place in professional contexts. Thus, unlike in Examples 1.1 and 1.2, in this email exchange transactional objectives do not take centre stage but rather the main aim of the exchange is relationally oriented: that is, to do collegiality and to maintain good relationships among colleagues.

The examples of professional communication discussed so far have come from a range of different workplaces, including a commercial organisation, a petrol station, and an educational institution. Yet, in spite of this diversity of context, there are some good reasons for describing all of these instances as professional communication, as we have seen. The next example is taken from yet another type of workplace: a hospital. The exchange occurred during a prenatal genetic counselling session between a pregnant woman (P) and a medical provider (MP) at a public hospital in Hong Kong. Both, the patient³ and the medical provider are non-native speakers of English.

Example 1.4

1. MP: Now, so today we invite you to come to see if you
2. want to have a test for Down Syndrome
3. and after you've watched the video erm do you have

4. any idea of Down Syndrome
5. P: what– what’s the– Down Syndrome?
6. MP: you don’t know what it is
7. P: mm hm it I – do you think I need to (do it)?
8. MP: OK now it’s up to you //some people doesn’t\
9. P: /I want to know\\ huh
10. MP: some people prefer to know whether the baby’s
11. Down Syndrome beforehand
12. so they go for tests
13. but some people doesn’t want to know

Source: Zayts and Schnurr (2011: 14).

This is another relatively obvious example of professional communication: the exchange takes place in a workplace context (a public hospital) and involves a professional (the medical provider) and a client (the pregnant woman). The main purpose of the talk is to ensure the patient has enough information about Down Syndrome in order to make an informed decision about which (if any) tests the client wants to undergo. Communication thus plays a crucial role in the professional activities which the medical provider is engaged in. In this way, communication is central to what the medical provider actually does, and it crucially contributes to creating and shaping a certain image of the profession of medical providers. This aspect is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Examples 1.1 to 1.4 have illustrated that professional communication may take different forms and may perform a wide range of different (more or less transactionally and relationally oriented) functions. However, all these examples are taken from interactions (both spoken and written) between two or more participants. So what about instances of one-way communication? What about those communicative events that do not require a response (verbally or in written form) but that primarily aim at providing information? Examples 1.5 and 1.6 are examples of such one-way communication in professional contexts.

Example 1.5 displays some of the values of an IT company. These values, which were displayed in a framed document in the entrance hall to the company’s office and on their internet site, are mainly targeted at staff (to remind them of the values of the company, which is an important aspect of its culture, as will be elaborated in more detail in Chapter 3), but also at clients (who may read them, for example, while they are waiting in the entrance hall) and at potential new employees (who may encounter them while searching the company’s online profile).

Example 1.5

Commitment: Solving problems, overcoming obstacles and delivering on our promises and obligations to our customers and to each other.

Teamwork: A willingness to share information, accepting and soliciting input from others and promoting win/win situations.

Quality of Life: Making sure it is all worthwhile. Fostering good relationships internally and externally, celebrating success and giving back whenever we can.

An organisation's values, like the ones described above, are said to be at the heart of what makes an organisation what it is (Hatch 1997). However, in reality, the values of different companies working in the same domain often resemble each other to some extent. Hence, values like 'commitment' and 'teamwork' are almost generic and are typically included, in one form or another, in a company's list of values (see also Example 1.6). Nevertheless, an organisation's values constitute important aspects of professional communication as they construct a certain image of a workplace both internally (among employees) and externally (for the wider public). These aspects are discussed in more detail in Chapters 3 and 5.

A relatively similar type of professional communication is shown in the next example, which is taken from a company's internal document: it is a paragraph from the code of conduct (here, a glossy brochure targeted at partners and employees) in the China branch of a large international consulting company.

Example 1.6

The fundamental importance of ethics and integrity is reflected in KPMG's vision of being a great place for advancing the careers of all our people in a rewarding and fulfilling environment. For our partners and all our employees, that means a strong sense of inclusion, mutual respect, open and honest communication, fairness, teamwork, and pride in being associated with each other and being part of KPMG. Our unshakeable commitment to integrity and to our vision of being an Employer of Choice is closely interconnected with the values that guide our actions.

According to the company's own definition the code of conduct is designed to outline ethical standards at the company. It is targeted specifically at people who work at the company and it is intended to provide some kind of guideline for them of what is considered to be acceptable and expected (or in the company's terms 'ethical')

behaviour. While there is a lot to say about this excerpt, I would like to draw attention here to the ways in which the company portrays itself, namely as ‘a great place’ and ‘a rewarding and fulfilling environment’. The company describes itself as being characterised by ‘a strong sense of inclusion, mutual respect, open and honest communication, fairness, teamwork, and pride’. These values together with the company’s vision are viewed as guiding members’ actions.

Due to the background knowledge they provide, these kinds of documents are important windows through which outsiders may gain interesting insights into an organisation’s self-perception. They provide good starting points, for example, to explore what aspects are considered important for a particular organisation. And these documents often show whether an organisation is rather competitive and achievement oriented or whether it puts considerable effort into maintaining a healthy work–life balance for its employees. However, as mentioned above, insights gained from organisational documents need to be treated with some caution as they do not necessarily capture the everyday realities employees are experiencing but rather describe how the organisation views and presents itself (this aspect is further elaborated in Chapter 3).

Exercise 1.2

Look again at the examples of professional communication displayed above and make a list of some of the features they have in common. You may want to consider, for example, interlocutors’ role relationships (such as whether they have a symmetrical or asymmetrical relationship with each other, what their roles are in the interaction, and how these issues are reflected in what they say), the topics of the exchanges, lexical choices and overall organisation of the communication excerpts.



This section has begun to explore the question of what professional communication is by looking at a range of different kinds of communicative instances which occur in different kinds of workplace contexts. Despite some differences between these exchanges they also shared several similarities, which leads to the question of how we can usefully conceptualise professional communication in terms that are broad enough to capture the different kinds of exchanges displayed above. Section B approaches this issue and tries to find some more answers to the question of what professional communication is.

Section B: Conceptualising professional communication

In approaching the question of how to conceptualise professional communication, we could perhaps start by saying that at the most

basic level, as the instances in Section A have shown, professional communication takes place in work contexts: that is, in places where at least one of the participants is engaged in some kind of (usually paid) work. We have also seen that professional communication may take place between professionals and customers (as in the sales encounter at the petrol station), among professionals (such as the email among colleagues), and among the organisation and the wider public (in the case of the organisation's values). And while these possible constellations are by no means exhaustive, they provide a useful starting point for exploring the context in which professional communication takes place. A useful way of conceptualising these different contexts is suggested by Goffman (1969), who distinguishes between so-called front and back regions.

Frontstage and backstage encounters

In describing ways of studying social life in general, Goffman (1969) uses the dramaturgical metaphors *frontstage* and *backstage*. Thus, he identifies '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). According to this metaphor, then, frontstage performances include an audience (for whom a 'show' of 'best behaviour' is put on) whereas backstage interactions are not usually accessible for an audience and may even contradict the frontstage performance.

This notion has also been applied to workplace contexts (e.g. Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Koester 2010) where frontstage encounters usually include interactions between professionals and lay people, such as between doctors and patients, lawyers and clients, and typical service encounters (such as in Examples 1.2 and 1.4). Backstage encounters, by contrast, refer to those interactions that take place between co-workers and colleagues, such as a meeting of a group of colleagues working on the same project or an email exchange (such as Examples 1.1 and 1.3).

However, as Goffman himself points out, there is not always a clear distinction between frontstage and backstage. Rather, there is some overlap in the actual behaviours displayed in both regions and in the activities associated with each (see also Sarangi and Roberts 1999). For example, in their everyday workplace realities, professionals may regularly move between front region and back region: healthcare professionals, for example, may attend so-called case conferences (backstage) to discuss the future treatment of their patients after and before seeing the patients (frontstage); they may also routinely interact with other health professionals (including doctors, nurses and lab

technicians) as well as administrative staff at the hospital (backstage). And while a lot of attention has been paid to frontstage encounters (in particular in medical contexts), activities performed in both regions crucially contribute to the work of a health professional. It is thus clearly important to explore both areas in any attempt to capture the complexities of professional communication.

The distinction between frontstage and backstage is not only based on the presence of an audience, but is also reflected in specific activities and in distinctive communicative behaviours typically displayed in encounters in each region. As Goffman (1969: 111) summarises:

[t]he backstage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-operative decision-making, profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping, smoking, rough informal dress, 'sloppy' sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or substandard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressivity and 'kidding', inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor physical self-involvements such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching, and flatulence. The frontstage behaviour language can be taken as the absence (and in some sense the opposite) of this.

As the examples in this and the other chapters illustrate, the specific context in which an interaction takes place (and whether it is frontstage or backstage) has a considerable impact on the communicative practices participants employ.

Another feature that the instances of professional communication in Section A have in common is an orientation to transactional objectives or work-related outcomes while at the same time considering relational aspects. However, the extent to which individual examples orient (more or less) towards transactional or relational aspects differs dramatically.

Transactional and relational aspects

The distinction between transactional and relational aspects is useful for understanding professional communication. As was shown in the examples in Section A, transactional aspects of an encounter refer to those behaviours that (more or less explicitly) aim at getting things done and achieving outcomes, while relationally oriented aspects describe behaviours that aim at enhancing interpersonal relationships and creating a positive working atmosphere.

Although both transactional and relational aspects are clearly important, in many workplace interactions transactional goals seem to be participants' main concern (Koester 2006: 26). This is also reflected

in the examples in Section A: in the medical encounter (Example 1.4), the medical provider's aim is to ensure the patient has sufficient information to reach an informed decision, and in Example 1.5 the organisational values of the IT company are aimed at creating a certain image of the company and to attract future clients. However, as we have seen in the examples, in addition to these overall transactional objectives, relational aspects are also of some importance. And it would probably be quite hard, if not entirely impossible, to act exclusively transactionally in a professional context. A hypothetical scenario where interlocutors might concentrate exclusively on transactional objectives is ticket-selling at a tourist destination, where the seller is occupied with serving long queues of impatiently waiting tourists, selling literally hundreds of tickets which may leave no time for relationally oriented talk. However, this is only a hypothetical situation, and as we have seen in Section A, even predominantly transactional exchanges (such as the one at the petrol station) may include some relational aspects (such as the greeting and friendly closing).

And although participating in relational behaviours may not seem strictly relevant for professional communication, doing collegiality and establishing or maintaining good relationships with colleagues, clients, superiors and subordinates is a crucial aspect of communication at work. After all, the nature of people's relationships may eventually impact on doing business: for example, getting along with each other and being on friendly terms may facilitate negotiations with clients and may improve the effectiveness of teamwork. A typical example of these relationally oriented aspects of professional communication is small talk which is often regarded as dispensable, superfluous and trivial although it may perform a wide range of useful functions in a workplace context (for a more detailed discussion see for example the contributions in Coupland 2000, Holmes and Stubbe 2003b ch. 5, and Koester 2010 ch. 5).

Moreover, as Koester (2010: 97) maintains, 'it is not possible to neatly separate talk that is purely instrumental from talk that has a relational or social purpose'. Rather, in their everyday work-communication, people typically combine transactional and relational elements, as the next example illustrates.

Example 1.7

Context: Email exchange between two academics.

Dear Rebecca,

Thanks so much for your prompt reply and for agreeing to review one of the papers!

And congratulations on the new baby!! [...] Is it a little boy/girl?? A while back, I sent you a Facebook friend request, not sure whether you received it or whether you use FB at all, but if you do, I would love to see some pics of the children... I attended [name of conference], but did not go to [name of city1]. I do hope to get to [name of city2] next year though. I am also organizing a conference in [name of city3], for [topic]. I will be sending info out in the next month or so I know it is a long way to travel, but it'd be great if you could come. ...

I have attached the paper and the evaluation form. Great to hear that mid September works for you. As I mentioned, the special issue focuses on [topic].

Thanks again!

All best wishes,

Nina

This email contains both transactional and relational aspects: Nina uses some small talk (for instance when enquiring about Rebecca's children) before she moves on to the more work-related reason for this email, namely to send a paper to her colleague for peer review. What is particularly interesting in this email is the ways in which relational and transactional topics follow each other closely and how they are interwoven with each other.

Exercise 1.3

In the email in Example 1.7 identify the transactional and relational aspects, and describe how they are intertwined with each other.



The examples of professional communication displayed in Section A have provided just a glimpse of the communicative exchanges that can be described as professional. They have shown that professional communication may employ different media (such as emails, face-to-face interactions and internet sites), it may involve different participants (including professionals and lay people), it may occur in a range of very different places where people work, and it may perform various (more or less transactional and relational) functions. This diversity is also reflected in the range of different labels that are used by scholars and practitioners to refer to and describe communication in workplace settings: institutional talk, professional discourse, organisational communication, workplace discourse, business communication and many more. On the one hand, this plethora of terms indicates a growing interest in what this book refers to as professional

communication, but on the other hand, the use of these different terms also suggests that there are differences (as well as overlaps) between the various phenomena. Five of these terms are briefly introduced below.

Institutional talk

Much of the early work on the language used in workplaces has used the term institutional talk (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992), which is still frequently used in more recent research (e.g. Thornborrow 2002). Institutional talk is often described as ‘talk between an expert representing some authority and a layman’ (Gunnarsson, Linell and Nordberg 1997: 7). In their influential collection of essays *Talk at Work*, Drew and Heritage (1992: 3) conceptualise 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’. Drew and Heritage (1992: 22) outline the three following features of institutional talk:

- orientation by at least one of the participants to some core goal, task or identity (or set of them) conventionally associated with the institution in question
- special and particular constraints on what one or both of the participants will treat as allowable contributions to the business at hand
- inferential frameworks and procedures that are particular to specific institutional contexts.

Participants’ goal orientation is, for example, reflected in the overall organisation and structure of the various phases in institutional encounters (such as the various stages in a medical consultation, a job interview or a meeting). The second point (that is, the constraints on what kinds of contributions interlocutors are allowed to make) refers to the observation that different interlocutors may have different rights and obligations in terms of their contributions. In Example 1.1, for instance, Clara dominates the talking time and makes some decisions (for instance, that she does not take the minutes) and assigns tasks to others (such as when she decides that Seth ‘can review the minutes from last week’ when he comes in later). A good illustration of the specific constraints on allowable contributions is shown in the next example.

Example 1.8

Context: During the expert witness testimony in court.

1. Counsel: Based on your observations of the Bronco
2. the times you've looked at it
3. can you see those two circled areas if the door is
4. closed?
5. Witness: Let me comment on about this photograph first if
6. I may, because I can't –
7. The Court: No You have to answer the question
8. Witness: Okay

Source: Cotterill (2003: 164).

This brief exchange between Counsel, the Court and a witness nicely demonstrates that interlocutors may have very different speaking rights and obligations and that deviations from them may be rebuked (as the Court does in line 7 after the witness attempts to comment rather than to answer the question by Counsel).

The third point made by Drew and Heritage refers to the observation that professional encounters tend to be characterised by different conversational 'rules' from those of ordinary conversations. For example, in courtroom settings, medical examinations and police interviews the professionals (such as a legal counsel, judge, nurse, midwife or police officer) are generally required to withhold expressions of their emotions (such as empathy or agreement). And while such behaviours would be interpreted as unusual, uncooperative and perhaps even rude in ordinary conversations, in the professional contexts they constitute normal and appropriate practice.

Drew and Heritage (1992: 3–4) further note 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.' In other words, an encounter cannot automatically be classified as institutional simply because it takes place in an institutional setting. For example, a chat between two friends in a hospital where one is a patient and the other works as a doctor does not necessarily have to be considered institutional as presumably none of the characteristics described above are met. However, if in the course of their encounter, participants switch into their institutional roles (and portray themselves as patient and doctor rather than friends) the nature of their interaction changes and becomes institutional (see also Chapter 5; Schegloff 1987).

Another term that is frequently used to capture communicative practices in professional contexts is professional discourse.

Professional discourse

In her book *Professional Discourse*, Gunnarsson (2009: 5) defines professional discourse as ‘cover[ing] text and talk – and the intertwinement of these modalities – in professional contexts and for professional purposes’. This definition is rather broad, and includes different types or modes of communication produced by professionals. A professional is defined by her as somebody who is paid for their work (whether skilled or unskilled). And although such a definition may pose potential problems (for example, it does not capture the work done by volunteers in non-profit organisations), it is nevertheless useful since it captures a wider range of interactions than the definition of institutional discourse.

According to Gunnarsson, the following features distinguish professional discourse from other types of discourse:

- 1 Professions are typically characterised by specific discourses which distinguish them from other professions. These discourse and profession-specific ways of using language create, reflect and reinforce those activities, knowledge and skills that characterise a specific profession. Newcomers need to learn these aspects of professional discourse as part of their professional or vocational training.
- 2 Professional discourse is often explicitly goal-oriented and situated. In other words, the goals of professional discourse are typically specified in written documents (such as mission statements, contracts, etc.) and they are often linked to specific actions with concrete results (such as examining patients and prescribing treatments in order to cure them). Most workplaces have specific expectations and norms about what is considered appropriate communication, specifically in terms of who communicates with whom, how and when.
- 3 The discourses of professions are often conventionalised, in particular, where they reflect specific practices which are characteristic for that profession (e.g. conventionalised patterns of doctor-patient interactions or courtroom interactions).
- 4 Professional discourse often reflects and reinforces the activities and practices that characterise a workplace unit or group within an organisation. These groups exist on various levels within a workplace, including small local working groups (e.g. a team on the factory floor), a specific workplace, and even an entire organisation.
- 5 Professional discourse depends on four societal frameworks: the legal political-framework, the technical framework, the socio-cultural framework, and the linguistic framework. These frameworks relate to important aspects of professional communication, such as issues

of multiculturalism at work (socio-cultural framework) and language policy (linguistic framework).

- 6 Professional discourses are not stable entities but change over time, for example due to technological advancements and political changes (such as internationalisation and globalisation). Some of these dynamic changes are outlined in more detail below and in the next chapter.

(Gunnarsson 2009: 8–10, 25–6)

Exercise 1.4

Drawing on the information provided above, describe the differences between institutional and professional discourse in your own words.

Answer Exercise 1.4 before reading on.

In discussing the differences between institutional and professional discourse, Sarangi and Roberts (1999: 13–19) outline some of the characterising features of each. They start by emphasising differences in the ways in which the terms ‘profession’ and ‘institution’ and their adjectives are used in everyday language, and they argue that an institution is the larger entity in which various professions are located. They provide the example of universities (as institutions), where different kinds of professionals interact with each other and with their clients (that is, students); in this sense some of the professions that can be found in universities include lecturers, technicians, cleaners and administrative staff. Based on these differences, Sarangi and Roberts (1999: 15, emphasis in original) propose that ‘what the professionals routinely do as a way of accomplishing their duties and responsibilities can be called *professional discourse*’ while ‘[i]nstitutional discourse would then comprise those features which are attributed to institutional practice, either manifestly or covertly, by professionals (and clients)’. In other words, how professionals communicate during the medical examination (as described in Section A) is an example of professional discourse, while institutional discourse refers to those communicative practices that are sanctioned by the institution and which, in turn, may be reflected in the ways in which medical examinations are routinely conducted.

Another example to illustrate this distinction is provided by Sarangi and Roberts (1999), who note that when communicating with each other and their clients, professionals perform institutional practices (such as record keeping in medical and educational settings) while the specific ways in which these practices are accomplished reflect aspects

of professional discourse in the sense that different professions may have different views about what is considered good record keeping. However, the distinction between professional and institutional discourse is not always straightforward, and in accomplishing their everyday work professionals routinely draw on both institutional and professional discourses (Roberts 2010: 183). As a consequence, the terms ‘professional discourse’ and ‘institutional discourse’ are often used interchangeably (Koester 2010: 5; Sarangi and Roberts 1999).

Two more terms that are also regularly often used to describe some of the phenomena displayed in the examples in Section A will be briefly introduced here, namely workplace discourse and business discourse.

Workplace discourse and business discourse

According to Koester (2010: 7), ‘workplace discourse’ is almost like an umbrella term for institutional, professional and business discourse, as it may be used to encompass all of these terms. In her book *Workplace Discourse* she defines workplace discourse as ‘spoken and written interaction occurring in a workplace setting’ (Koester 2010: 3). This term is rather general and includes all sorts of occupational contexts, such as white-collar and blue-collar workplaces, hospitals, courtrooms, as well as corporate and non-profit organisations, and many more. In this definition the term workplace discourse may be used to refer to communication between different companies (such as a contract about future collaboration) and it also includes communication between professionals and lay people (such as the prenatal genetic counselling session or the brief encounter at the petrol station discussed in Section A). However, the term workplace discourse also captures company internal communication, such as the email exchanges between the colleagues at the educational institution, and the organisational values from the IT company provided in Section A.

‘Business discourse’, by contrast, has a more restricted meaning, and refers to those interactions that occur specifically in commercial organisations. In their book *Business Discourse* Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken (2007: 3) define business discourse as being ‘all about how people communicate using talk or writing in commercial organizations in order to get their work done’. Being conceptualised as ‘social action in business contexts’, their definition of business discourse explicitly focuses on spoken talk and written texts produced in business settings, thereby not including other types of workplaces or professional settings, such as factories, hospitals and courtrooms. Thus, due to its specific focus on the commercial sector, business discourse is often viewed as one type of workplace discourse.

The brief overview of the various communication phenomena that occur in workplace contexts has shown that there are some

differences but also considerable overlaps in what phenomena the various traditions or research strands look at, and how they approach and conceptualise them. In this book I will use the term ‘professional communication’ to avoid some of the limitations and possible confusions over conceptual overlaps and differences. Moreover, using a relatively broad definition of professional communication (as outlined below) it will be possible to take language use in professional contexts a little beyond discourse boundaries into broader parameters of communication – for example by also considering multimedia and multimodal instances of professional communication, including videoconferencing, websites and associated images, logos and non-verbal communication.

Professional communication

The term ‘professional communication’ will be used to describe the phenomena shown in the examples in Section A. In particular, professional communication is conceptualised very broadly as interactions which may take various forms and which take place in a context that is broadly related to work, and involve at least one participant who is engaged in some work-related activity.

Such a definition of professional communication is broad enough to explore different types of encounters in the variety of workplaces described in Section A, including interactions between professionals and lay people (such as the encounter at the petrol station), exchanges among professionals (such as the email exchange between the colleagues at an educational institution), as well as one-way communication between an organisation and its members and clients (such as the code of conduct). In this way, then, professional communication is used as an umbrella term for communicative encounters that take place in a workplace context in the widest sense.

The main focus throughout the book will be on the various aspects of verbal communication, but non-verbal aspects are discussed where relevant (most notably in Chapters 3 and 4). In exploring the multiple aspects of professional communication, the subsequent chapters draw on examples of authentic professional communication collected in a wide range of workplaces including white-collar and blue-collar workplaces, corporate and non-profit environments, as well as medical, classroom and legal settings. Although as Sarangi and Candlin (2011: 1) argue, ‘it will be an overstatement to claim that language is the only modality in which professional practice is manifest’, the main focus of this book is on the language used in professional contexts. However, other components of communication, in particular multimodal features such as textual, rhetorical, visual and audible features that have also been found to be relevant for an understanding

of (professional) communication, are mentioned and referred to where useful.

Before exploring specific aspects of professional communication in more detail in the subsequent chapters, I will briefly outline some of the changes that have affected professional communication in a variety of ways and which are crucial for an understanding of how communication is done in any workplace.

Changes in professional communication

In the past few decades organisations have undergone considerable structural changes which also impact professional communication. These changes, as Gunnarsson (2009: 10) notes, are reflected in various aspects of professional communication, including ‘purpose, content and language, as well as ... linguistic form and patterns’. Three of these changes are briefly outlined here, namely the internationalisation and globalisation of the economy, technological advances, and what has been described as the ‘new work order’.

It is widely acknowledged that the worldwide internationalisation and globalisation of the economy is contributing to an increasing number of multicultural and multilingual workplaces. More and more corporations are opening offices around the globe and operating in a range of different countries, and the workforce is becoming increasingly mobile. These social and economic changes impact on professional communication in a variety of ways, including the use of English and other languages as lingua franca in intercultural encounters (see e.g. Koester 2010 ch. 6). These trends also pose several concrete challenges for employees, such as the need to be proficient in several languages to communicate with colleagues, clients and stakeholders across different countries (see also Chapter 4).

A second change is related to technological advances that have taken place over the last couple of decades and that have considerably contributed to changing the image of professional communication. It has even been noted that ‘[e]very strand of workplace communication has, in one way or the other, been transformed by technology’ (Gunnarsson 2009: 249). Fax, email, the World Wide Web and mobile phones play a crucial part in what has been called ‘a new era of mobile computing’ (Blundel 2004: 152) that allows employees to work at remote locations while still being able to access corporate intranets. The various developments in new communication technology have created new, and often more complex, forms of professional interaction which may combine (and sometimes replace) several traditional forms of communication, such as videoconferencing (see also Chapter 2).

A last change discussed here refers to changes in professional ideology, often referred to as the ‘new work order’ (see Geis, Brown

and Wolfe 1990), which are increasingly being adopted by organisations. These ideological changes are reflected in and affect several aspects of organisational reality. For example, they have led to transitions in workplace culture, which in turn are often reflected in a restructuring of organisational hierarchies where flatter structures with fewer levels of management are increasingly becoming the norm (see also Chapters 5 and 7). These changes have also affected communication and have been referred to as the 'democratisation' of discourse (Fairclough 1992: 201). This democratisation is reflected on the level of discourse practices: for example, in the elimination of overt power markers and a tendency towards more informal language. In this respect, then, the discourse of organisations (similar to other types of public discourse) is becoming increasingly more informal, and more and more resembles discourse that occurs in the private domain. In fact, it has been noted that 'conversational discourse practices which traditionally belong in the private sphere are being systematically simulated within organizations' (Fairclough 1992: 8). These tendencies have been referred to as the 'conversationalisation' of discourse (Fairclough 1992). As a consequence of these trends, workplace communication tends to occur in a more informal, conversational manner.

The new work order, in turn, has also led to changes in divisions of labour and management approaches which put increasing emphasis on empowering employees: rather than telling them what to do 'they are made responsible for motivating, disciplining and directing themselves' (Cameron 2000: 14; this aspect is elaborated in Chapter 5 where the effects on professional identities are discussed in more detail). As a consequence, working together and collaborating with colleagues from other teams and departments is becoming increasingly important, and certain organisational practices, such as problem solving and standardising procedures, are reconceptualised as teamwork and are not the responsibilities of individuals anymore (Iedema and Scheeres 2003: 318).

These changes also have profound effects on the professional identities of employees: that is, the ways in which they perceive themselves and their role and responsibilities in the wider context of their workplace (see also Fairclough 1992). In a study of a gaming-machine factory and a teaching hospital, for instance, Iedema and Scheeres (2003) observed how structural changes in these workplaces have affected staff members. These restructuring processes include increased worker knowledge of and responsibility for productivity targets (in the factory) and the introduction of a new management structure which increases, for example, doctors' accountability for their activities to management and colleagues (at the hospital). As a consequence of these changes, the factory workers and the clinical

staff were facing specific challenges in constructing their professional identities:

[j]ust as it is becoming harder for factory workers to deny responsibility for their work and for their role in that work, and to ignore the workings of the organization as a whole, doctors can no longer presume status and privilege, and act on the basis of a professional autonomy that is not accountable in some way to colleagues, the rest of the organization, management, or the public. (Iedema and Scheeres 2003: 332)

The study showed that the ways in which the factory workers and the hospital staff perceived themselves, the work they do and their roles in their specific workplaces have undergone dramatic changes.

In addition to the changes outlined here, there are, of course, other changes which affect professional communication in one way or another and which may pose a challenge to more traditional forms of communication. Some of these challenges dealt with in the literature include, for example, blurred organisational boundaries (for example in joint ventures between organisations) and increasing involvement of stakeholders (e.g. Blundel 2004).

The next section briefly discusses the relevance of communication for an understanding of what is going on in workplaces, and addresses the question of why professional communication should be studied from an applied linguistics perspective.

Section C: Approaching professional communication from the perspective of applied linguistics

Sections A and B have established that the role of communication cannot be overemphasised for an understanding of workplace realities. Many of the activities that characterise, and to a certain extent form and create, workplaces and professional practices are related to communication. In a similar vein, Gunnarsson et al. (1997: 1) maintain that:

language has become one of the most important tools of many new professions where oral and written contact with the general public forms the core of professional work. Telephone calls, meetings, negotiations and conferences have become the cornerstones of professional contacts. Many experts – business people, lawyers, health care personnel, street-level bureaucrats – spend a lot of their working hours in talk with clients, colleagues and other professionals.

However, although the crucial role of language and communication for organisational practices is now widely accepted, this was not

always the case. It was only a few decades ago when organisational studies took a 'discursive turn' and began to acknowledge the usefulness of conceptualising 'issues of power, hegemony and ideology' no longer as purely historical or psychological issues but as being dynamically and constantly created, reflected, reinforced, and challenged in 'social and linguistic practices' (Iedema and Wodak 1999: 7). As a consequence of this shift in attention towards linguistic and communicative practices, researchers were no longer primarily interested in the interplay between the perceptions, practices, behaviours and motivations of organisational members in relation to organisational macro-structures, but began to pay closer attention to the linguistic and communicative practices through which organisations are actually formed and performed (Iedema and Wodak 1999: 7). In line with this trend, communication in its various forms was and still is perceived as being at the heart of what is going on in many workplaces.

This crucial role of communication in workplace contexts is also increasingly recognised by practitioners and is, for example, reflected in an increasing demand for professional training (including workshops and conferences) targeted at improving professional communication, both internally and externally. Issues of particular interest to practitioners are, for example, how to improve internal communication (in particular top-down communication), how to communicate changes (such as restructuring plans), how to facilitate company mergers, how to improve external communication (for example by involving shareholders more systematically), and how to improve or change a company's public image. The list seems endless, and demonstrates the wide applicability of issues of professional communication in the 'real world'.

Perhaps not surprisingly, professional communication has received a lot of attention from researchers in different disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.⁴ These diverse disciplines bring with them not only different epistemological stances but also different ways of approaching professional communication. The multidisciplinary nature of research on professional communication is further reflected in the diversity of paradigms, research methods and theoretical frameworks that are at play when members of different disciplines analyse the ways in which people communicate at work. However, if we follow Candlin and Sarangi, who 'see applied linguistics as a many centred and interdisciplinary endeavour whose coherence is achieved in purposeful, mediated action by its practitioners' (2004: 2), it becomes clear why applied linguistics provides a particularly valuable perspective through which professional communication may be approached. One of the main tenets of applied linguistics, as Candlin and Sarangi (2004) go on

to argue, is to combine and manage potential tensions between ‘reflexivity and relevance’ (Sarangi and Candlin 2003): that is, between the potentially opposing demands of adhering to and furthering the theoretical principles and practices that characterise the field of applied linguistics on the one hand, and producing research outcomes that are of practical relevance for participants and collaborators from other disciplines on the other hand. In achieving these aims, research conducted within applied linguistics often usefully engages in ‘crossdisciplinary dialogue’ (Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007: 66) and draws on theoretical constructs and methodologies from other disciplines. Such an approach is particularly fruitful for capturing the theoretical complexities of professional communication as well as their practical implications and applications.

This multidisciplinary of research on professional communication is also to some extent reflected in the various chapters, which provide insights into some of the diverse ways in which the complexities of professional communication may be approached. In doing this, I draw on research conducted in different disciplines, using different research methods and different analytical frameworks when approaching specific issues of professional communication. Such an emphasis on diversity, I hope, will illustrate some of the advantages that these different angles and perspectives may bring to an analysis of professional communication. Combining their strengths, I believe, can only be beneficial for an understanding of the complexities of professional communication.

Some of the research methods and analytical frameworks frequently used to approach professional communication within applied linguistics include ethnography, conversation analysis (CA), genre analysis, interactional sociolinguistics, and critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Koester 2010: 9; Iedema and Wodak 1999). Most of them are introduced in more detail in the subsequent chapters, where it is demonstrated how these different approaches and research methods provide useful starting points to approach the various topics of professional communication. A particular emphasis throughout this book is on discourse-analytic approaches to professional communication. As Iedema and Wodak (1999: 12) note, discourse analytic approaches have the advantage of ‘being able to highlight the dynamic social construction of institutional relations and structures (Woolard, 1985)’. They thus enable analysts to identify and observe the specific micro-level practices which contribute to creating the very structures and realities that characterise particular workplaces, while also considering wider organisational processes and phenomena on a macro level. Thus, although applied linguistics is often perceived as being primarily concerned with a wide range of pedagogical issues relating to language use and acquisition, research on professional communication

within this discipline predominantly explores how people in a workplace setting communicate with each other and with their clients, stakeholders and the wider public (see also Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007: 5).

Brief outline of the book

The subsequent chapters introduce a variety of different topics of professional communication, including genres, workplace culture, culture and politeness at work, professional identities, gender, and leadership. In choosing these topics I have tried to combine more traditional subjects (such as genres) with more non-traditional and perhaps unconventional ones (such as leadership and gender). While I am aware that such a choice almost inevitably means that some other (equally relevant and interesting) topics have to be excluded, I believe that the various chapters nicely illustrate some of the everyday problems and practices that are typical for communication in many professional contexts. I thus hope that the subsequent chapters will contribute towards reaching an understanding of some of the issues and complexities that characterise professional communication.

Chapter 2 follows up on some of the issues raised in this introductory chapter. Its particular focus is on further exploring how the various different kinds of professional communication outlined in this chapter can be grouped together in meaningful ways. In approaching this issue, Chapter 2 focuses on genres of professional communication, and explores what the notion of genre has to offer in terms of accounting for potential differences and similarities between different kinds of professional communication. Genre analysis is introduced as an approach to systematically describing the specific features and functions of different kinds of professional communication.

After this chapter has provided a general picture of professional communication and some of the genres that fall under this term, Chapter 3 begins to further explore some of the differences in communicative behaviour displayed by members in different workplaces. In doing so, it looks for reasons underlying these differences in communication habits that typically characterise different workplaces. These differences are not only reflected in the form and function of communication but are also made visible in other aspects of workplaces, such as dress code, organisational hierarchies and office layout. The notion of workplace culture is introduced to help conceptualise some of these observable (as well as invisible) differences, and its crucial relevance for professional communication is discussed. Three approaches to workplace culture, namely models by Edgar Schein and Geert Hofstede and the concept of community of practice, provide useful starting points for gaining insights into the complexities of the culture(s) of a workplace.

Chapter 4 stays with the topic of culture, and explores the role of national culture in professional encounters, with a particular focus on the complex relationship between culture and politeness. Due to the increasing globalisation and mobility of the workforce, multicultural (and often multilingual) workplaces have become the norm. The chapter thus approaches the question of whether culture is an issue at work and what role politeness plays in these contexts. In line with recent research developments, this chapter challenges essentialist assumptions that tend to treat culture as the default explanation for a wide range of phenomena. Rather than assuming that (national) culture is an issue in any kind of intercultural encounter, the examples in this chapter demonstrate that culture is often just an unremarkable aspect of workplace realities. However, in those instances where miscommunication occurs, culture (and in particular, cultural stereotypes) tend to be perceived as the source of these mismatches by lay people. And in many instances of miscommunication, participants' face needs are often particularly vulnerable and issues of politeness become relevant. However, in analysing intercultural (and cross-cultural) communication, it is crucial to take a critical stance towards culture and to move beyond stereotypical assumptions and consider other factors when explaining specific communicative events. Two frameworks that may help understand the role of face and politeness in intercultural and cross-cultural contexts are politeness theory and rapport management. They both explore how specific ways of perceiving and enacting face needs and politeness may help making sense of those instances where a misunderstanding might occur – in particular in intercultural encounters.

Chapter 5 focuses on the complex notion of identity, and explores some of the ways in which the notion of 'who we are' is particularly relevant in a professional context. The chapter takes as a starting point the observation that issues of identity are omnipresent in professional (and other) contexts which are reflected in various aspects of professional communication. In interacting with each other, people at work constantly set up subject positions for themselves and each other and orient towards who they are (to each other) in the specific context of the encounter as well as in the wider context of their workplace. Participants thereby create, negotiate and sometimes challenge their own and each other's identities and roles, which are always to some extent related to issues of power. The crucial role of language in the various processes involved in identity construction is accounted for by social constructionism. One specific framework for analysing identity construction (proposed by Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall) is outlined and its five principles of identity construction are applied to examples of professional communication.

Chapter 6 illustrates some of the ways in which gender is an important aspect of workplace realities, and how it interacts with

professional communication in myriad ways. Not only does the existence of gender stereotypes about how men and women supposedly talk and act sometimes surface in people's discourse these stereotypical expectations may also have implications for the often discriminatory perception and treatment of women in specific workplaces and professions. Some of the disadvantages that women are faced with are the double-bind and the glass ceiling. Although gender is always potentially relevant in any (professional and other) encounter, its impact may become particularly obvious in the use and perception of gendered speech styles and the existence of gendered discourses. Through these avenues gender is enacted and reinforced (or sometimes challenged) in professional communication. One of the approaches frequently used to identify and expose some of the discriminatory practices (and the ways in which they are reinforced in and through discourse) is critical discourse analysis, which aims at changing social inequalities by making people aware of the (often communicative) mechanisms that contribute to their existence.

The topic of Chapter 7 is leadership. This chapter approaches the question of what leadership is by focusing on discourse. It explores how leadership is accomplished through communication. Examples from various workplaces illustrate that in addition to traditional hierarchical and often asymmetrical relationships, there are various alternative leadership constellations where power and responsibilities are more equally shared among participants. Various factors have an impact on how leadership is performed, including the working teams of the leaders, the cultures of their workplaces, the wider sociocultural context in which they interact, gender, and the medium or channel of communication. Discursive leadership, a tradition established in leadership research, acknowledges the central role of communication in leadership processes and provides a useful framework for approaching the complexities of leadership discourse, especially when combined with discourse analytical approaches, such as conversation analysis or interactional sociolinguistics. These approaches offer valuable tools for analysing leadership discourse and for exploring how leadership is actually done on the micro level.

Chapter 8 provides a brief conclusion by bringing together some of the arguments provided in the previous chapters, and by outlining some avenues for future research in professional communication, in particular for student projects.

Summary

This chapter has explored the question of what professional communication is. Several examples of authentic communication have illustrated the vast diversity of communicative events that fall under

the umbrella of professional communication, and similarities as well as differences between these examples have been discussed. In particular, most instances of professional communication are characterised by an overall orientation towards outcomes (transactional aspects) while still considering relational aspects.

This diversity is also reflected in the various labels that have been proposed to describe interactions in workplace contexts, including institutional talk, professional discourse, workplace discourse and business discourse. Professional communication is conceptualised here rather broadly as any interaction that takes place in a workplace context (in the wider sense) and that involves at least one professional. This definition captures various forms of communication that take place in both the front region and the back region of any workplace.

Professional communication has also undergone crucial changes over the last few decades, which are mainly related to the internationalisation and globalisation of the economy, technological advances, and ideological changes (as reflected in, for example, the new work order). These social tendencies and developments have had (and still have) an impact on how people communicate at work.

Clearly, professional communication is of multidisciplinary interest. However, this book mainly takes an applied linguistics perspective, in particular by drawing on insights gained from discourse-analytical approaches, some of which are outlined in the chapters to come. And while this chapter has established the crucial role of communication in most (if not all) workplaces, the next chapter further explores some of the multiple forms or genres of professional communication and how they can be conceptualised in meaningful ways.