
Knowledge Communication

Formative Ideas and Research Impetus

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Ontology, Opposition, and Commensalism: A Brief History of Ideas of LSP

In order to introduce to a (primarily) North American audience the notion of Knowledge Communication¹ I would like to begin with a brief history of ideas² of the school of thought from which Knowledge Communication has emerged. This history of ideas is centered on three strands of thought which have been (and still are) formative in the development of professional communication in (continental) Europe as a research and university teaching discipline. The school of thought, which encompasses professional communication in (continental) Europe, is called Language for Specific/Special Purposes (LSP). From the viewpoint of a history of ideas, three strands of thought have dominated LSP research over the years: (a) An expanding linguistic ontology, (b) an ideology of opposition, and (c) a commensal relationship with (nonlinguistic) host discipline(s).

When it comes to "language," LSP has always had very strong ties to linguistics.³ It is therefore no coincidence that one strand of the history of ideas of LSP is made up of objects of study stemming from linguistics. From lexis, that is, terms and terminology (e.g., Wüster, 1931) over syntax, that is, sentence

¹ This article is an edited version of the keynote that I gave at the CPTSC meeting in Aarhus, Denmark, in 2009. I would like to thank CPTSC for its generous offer to both let me give the keynote and to publish the paper.

² In a North American context, the notion of history of ideas goes back to Arthur O. Lovejoy (1936).

³ In connection with "language," it is noteworthy that LSP has always—typically via LSP translation—had strong ties to second and tertiary language acquisition at university level, too.

structures and preferences (Hoffmann, 1976) to stylistics (Spillner, 1986), text (Kalverkämper, 1983) and currently genre (Göpferich, 1995). Over the course of modern LSP—from its early beginnings in the first half of the 20th century until today—we see a distinct pattern in the development of the objects of study. In the sense that, incrementally, the objects examined grow ever larger and ever more complex—basically from lexemes to genres.

When it comes to the ideology of opposition, the opposition in question is one of LSP versus ordinary—that is, nonspecific/nonspecial—language. Even if—to either a rhetorician or a communication scholar—the notion of language use may always be purposeful or specific, the demarcation as well as the school of thought behind it is very real indeed within LSP. What is meant by LSP is, generally speaking, the discourse of/in/by trades, professions, and disciplines; that is, socially formed and institutionalized activities or practices, which have to a large degree been sanctioned by some sort of (typically official) authority, e.g., a university, a committee, or a board. These activities and practices are seen as being in opposition to everyday activities and practices.⁴ This opposition has been productive research-wise in the sense that it has spurred on much work from special lexis (i.e., developing terminologies of various kinds), to special genres (i.e., exhaustive descriptions of genres such as arbitration and patents). Apart from that research, it has even given rise to particular linguistics such as LSP text linguistics and LSP genre linguistics.

Despite its merits, the relationship between LSP and the disciplines, trades and professions with which LSP forms a symbiotic relationship, is not one of equality. Even if it is a symbiotic relationship it is not one of mutualism, but of commensalism. That is to say that LSP hardly effects, say, engineering disciplines, even if LSP researchers have studied engineering discourses for decades, whereas changes in the “host discipline,” e.g., engineering or nanotechnology, do indeed have an impact in LSP research. In the sense that new insights in the host disciplines breed new concepts, words, texts, genres and discourses—that is, new objects of study for LSP. The climate change and its emergent discourses are a vivid example of such commensalism; as well as an example that this relationship is not reversible.

Transition to Knowledge Communication by Way of a Few Critical Remarks

In my definition of Knowledge Communication (Kastberg, 2007), I took my point of departure in the above (critical) understanding of LSP, which in turn means that Knowledge Communication in many ways has emerged as a

⁴ Strangely, the characteristics of these dimensions of nonspecial/nonspecific entities have never really been examined to any larger extent within LSP research; they, therefore, typically function as the stipulated opposition to whatever LSP entity is examined.

response to LSP and to the three strands constituting its history of ideas. From my reading of LSP research literature, I have extracted what I believe to be LSP's two most salient aspects: The fact that the pivotal point was always specialized knowledge of some kind (be it in a trade, within a discipline etc.) and that the guiding question always was what happens with this knowledge (be in terminologies, discourses or genres; that is, in communication)? So building on the aspects of specialized knowledge and communication, Knowledge Communication was formed as a reaction to LSP, but—and this is important—whereas Knowledge Communication does recognize the accomplishments of LSP, it does not accept what I see as its limitations. And these limitations, too, I see mirrored in the three strands mentioned previously.

Even if the incremental expansion of the linguistic ontology—and hence the object of study—meant that LSP over the years would gradually be able to encompass entities of such complexity as genre, LSP is still—*mutatis mutandis*—a text-bound school of thought. Naturally, being text-bound, LSP has obtained a remarkable depth of insight into all matters pertaining to LSP texts. Depth of insight, however, harbors the danger of tunnel vision. Or to put it in words Protagoras may have welcomed, the text is not the measure of all things. As to the ideology of opposition, which not only permeates LSP but in many ways also structures it; that notion, too, is problematic. I'm not proclaiming that there are no differences between discursive practice at a workplace and, say, at home, because there surely are, but to talk about different languages is, to me at least, *contra* intuitive and probably in the long run even *contra* productive. What we are discussing are different discourses, many of which may co-exist; they may compete with one another and they may over time and from setting to setting develop along different or similar trajectories. Were a perspective within LSP to be developed along these lines, it would add considerably by way of nuances to LSP research; it would, however, also undermine its dichotic foundation.

The commensal relationship with (nonlinguistic) host discipline(s) can—in a (continental) European setting at least—be traced all the way back to the decline of romanticism (and with it the demise of the Goethean “universal geniuses”) and the onset of modernity (with its strict division of labor and general reverence for functionalism). Historic roots aside, this relationship cannot and will not change, the simple reason being that if you take out of LSP the special/specific purposes, you only have language left. In that sense LSP is an applied field of research and if you take away that unto which it applies itself (that is if you take away the host disciplines), the field of LSP ceases to exist.

As previously stated, Knowledge Communication is in many ways a reaction or a response to LSP and, having briefly introduced the three strands in the

history of ideas, I am now able to qualify that statement. In its capacity as a reaction or a response to LSP, Knowledge Communication sees the linguistic ontology, expanding though it may be, as a limitation, not so much with regards to the objects studied—they are both relevant and legitimate—but with regard to the ontological perspective itself. As a consequence, Knowledge Communication claims that not ontologies but epistemologies should be the driving force (see the *Epistemologies* subsection for an elaboration). As for the ideology of opposition, Knowledge Communication as a research field subscribes to an ideology of convergence rather than of opposition (see the *Convergence* subsection for an elaboration). Last but not least, Knowledge Communication recognizes that it, too, stands in symbiotic relationships to a variety of other disciplines. Knowledge Communication, however, claims that these relationships are not commensal symbioses, but rather that they are mutual symbioses (see the *Mutualism* subsection for an elaboration).

Formative Ideas on Knowledge, Communication and the Knowledge Society

Epistemologies

If we take epistemology⁵ to mean as much as theory of knowledge and if we accept that there exist a number of such epistemologies, then we would have to concur that epistemologies are a matter of one's perspective (basically of the world). José Ortega y Gasset (1923/1961) put it this way:

Perspective is one of the component parts of reality. Far from being a disturbance of its fabric, it is its organizing element. . . . Every life is a point of view directed upon the universe. Strictly speaking, what one life sees no other can. . . . Reality happens to be, like a landscape, possessed of an infinite number of perspectives, all equally veracious and authentic. The sole false perspective is that which claims to be the only one there is. (p. 90)⁶

Leaving ontology as a frame of reference and being epistemologically open, as it were, Knowledge Communication had to reinvent its perspective(s). But because the phenomenon of knowledge is a pivotal point to Knowledge Communication and because epistemology was to be the frame of reference,

⁵ A compound derived from Greek (*episteme* and *logos*), epistemology was originally a philosophical discipline, which focused on such dimensions as “what knowledge is,” “how knowledge is acquired,” and “how and if we can know anything.” Nowadays, however, epistemological views are also found in such metatheories as, say, positivism, constructivism, and rationalism because they each have a specific (or paradigmatic) view on knowledge, its definition, and acquisition.

⁶ I would like to thank my colleagues Hugo Alro and Egon Noe for this reference.

the reinvention proved to be relatively straightforward. Three perspectives, that is, construction, representation, and communication of knowledge, were developed; partly because they seem to be able to encompass a sort of prototypical lifecycle of knowledge and partly due to the almost intuitively narrative nature of the triplet. Although the three perspectives together constitute a whole, each perspective has its own agenda:

- Construction: How may knowledge be constructed, individually, socially, discursively, or cognitively.
- Representation: How may knowledge be represented, materially⁷ (e.g., in texts, architecture, or technology) as well as immaterially (in/as culture, conventions, habits, or rituals).
- Communication: How may knowledge be communicated to the “alter” (how—if at all—, in which settings, media, or practices).

In their capacities as epistemological perspectives, they are analytical and not empirical entities; among other things this difference means that they are separated only to the extent that it fits the purpose of the research project in question (see the *Research Impetus* section). Naturally, they may—and often do—overlap empirically. The transcendental nature of the three perspectives, however, implies that even if one perspective is singled out, analyzed, and discussed individually; the frame of reference is always the “whole elephant,” never (merely) the tusk, a foot, the trunk as in the well-known Buddhist “Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant” (Udana, pp. 68–69).

One advantage of this more complex, epistemological frame of reference, apart from avoiding the tunnel vision of much previous LSP research, is that adhering to a holistic view, Knowledge Communication researchers are able to engage in several theory discussions, foremost between (a) cognition and linguistics (knowledge → discourse), (b) linguistics and communication (knowledge → discourse → context), and (c) communication and society (knowledge → discourse → context → cooperation).

Summarizing the dominant research interests of cognition to be construction and representation of conceptual/cognitive knowledge, and those of linguistics to be linguistic (semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic) features of discourse, potentially fruitful theory discussions emerge between the two in relation to the integration of knowledge representation into linguistic and discursive structures. Compared to the discursive focus of linguistics, the research interests of communication are primarily directed at interactional aspects, the object of study being centred on aspects of the discourse-in-use. Not, as it were,

⁷ As can easily be inferred, the material representation of knowledge shares some commonalities with the ontological views of LSP.

discourse per se. Potentially fruitful theory discussion between the two can be established where, for instance, speech act structures influence the communicative effect or where the communicative conditions influence the structure of the discourse. The final theory discussion is that which comes into existence between communication (with its point of departure in contextual issues) and social sciences with their focus on cooperative relationships between systems (e.g., in the sense of open systems' theory). Potentially fruitful theory discussions between context and cooperation can be opened where the relatively micro-oriented communicative theories meet and overlap with the relatively macro-oriented social science theories. With the slogan-like credo of modern-day communication theory that "organization is communication," a forum for discussions of the theoretical limits and potentials of each theory conglomerate is self-evident.

The ability to engage the ideas of disciplines spanning from cognition to social science is in itself a property, which is probably unique to Knowledge Communication. But being able to span several theory discussions does not imply that Knowledge Communication has no identity of its own, because it does—albeit at a postmodern, hypercomplex level (see Kastberg, 2007).

Convergence

At a philosophical level, the ideology of convergence is congenial to the above elaborations, but convergence within Knowledge Communication is also seen at a more practical level. Whereas the *Epistemologies* subsection primarily focused on the issue of knowledge, and its inter and transdisciplinary nature within Knowledge Communication, convergence primarily focuses on a perception of communication.

The previous century saw a significant development of the theoretical framework for understanding how communication works and, consequently, how communication could theoretically be modelled. Steven A. Beebe, Susan J. Beebe, and Diana K. Ivy (2004) sum it up in this way:

Our understanding of communication has changed over the past century [i.e., the 20th century]. Communication was initially viewed as a transfer or exchange of information, but it evolved to include a more interactive give-and-take approach. It then progressed even further to today's view that communication is a process in which meaning is created simultaneously among people. (p. 11)

The transactive model of communication, that is, communication as co-construction, is today widely recognized as the (so far) most adequate illustration of how real-life communication is understood to work. It is, therefore, also the

model of communication unto which the elaboration of the formative idea in question in this section will be applied. Rogers and Kincaid (1981) have developed a version of the transactive model of communication, the convergence model of communication. Convergence metaphorically alludes to the idea that communicative partners converge on mutual understanding and (if the communication is successful) shared meaning and possibly shared action:

The model . . . depicts two participants (A and B) sharing a piece of information in a communicative situation or a series of situations. A and B perceive, interpret and understand the information, which may result in some sort of belief and action. This process, occurring over time, is a psychological one with an individual's background, personality, and so on playing a significant role. (Windahl, Siginitzer, & Olson, 2002, p. 73)

Approaching communication from this perspective has far-reaching consequences. Because, as can be extracted from the quotation, the traditional notions of sender, receiver, and message have no place in this model, and hence no place in this perception of communication. Neither does this perception of communication allow for the "transfer" of knowledge between communication partners, knowledge is (discursively and otherwise) co-constructed. Based on such a framework a link may easily be established to the Habermasian notion of "communicative action." But whereas Knowledge Communication is transactive and allowing for knowledge to be co-constructed, the participants are not necessarily equals in the sense of Habermas' "communicative action" and Knowledge Communication is characterized by being goal-oriented and thus, *eo ipso* "strategic communication" in a Habermasian sense.⁸ The goal, however, is the mediation of understanding across knowledge asymmetries (see also the *Mutualism* subsection) and not the oppression of the "alter" (as implied in strategic communication by Habermas). Taken seriously as communication in this transactive sense, then, Knowledge Communication is participative (interactive) and the entity, on which the communicative positions converge, is the co-construction of knowledge. But here we must not overlook that whereas Knowledge Communication is participative, it is not necessarily reciprocal. Referring to the existence of knowledge asymmetries,⁹ there is by definition at least two positions in a knowledge communicative event: One position characterized by having a (relative) knowledge surplus and one position characterized by having a (relative) knowledge deficit. But neither must we overlook that the

⁸ See for instance Nancy R. Blyler (1994) for a discussion of these topics within the framework of technical communication.

⁹ For an in-depth elaboration of knowledge asymmetries in this sense, see Peter Kastberg (2009) "Knowledge Asymmetries: Beyond To Have and Have Not."

terms *knowledge surplus* (usually associated with the position of the expert) and *knowledge deficit* (usually associated with the position of the layperson) are by no means absolute terms. On the contrary, they are highly dynamic, both in the sense that the expert within one field may be a layperson within another, and in the sense that over time the label of layperson as well as that of expert may be rendered obsolete for a person in relation to a specific field or topic. In this connection it is important to add that adhering to an ideal of convergence, Knowledge Communication does not a priori subscribe to the notion that the expert is *eo ipso* the oppressor and the layperson *eo ipso* the oppressed in a knowledge asymmetry as much literature from within the field or critical studies would have it. By introducing this less confrontational ideology, I am by no means overlooking or discarding of neither the nature nor the phenomenon of oppression and exploitation, because that would obviously make me a “useful idiot” (as Lenin may have put it) of the powers that be in late capitalist societies. I am merely advocating that a changing of the optics may lead to new avenues of research.

Returning to convergence, I would say that what an ideology of transactive communication calls for is the creation of fora in which positions (be it individuals or communities) may be stimulated to interact with one another or with one or more media or channels in order to overcome knowledge asymmetries. Talking about such fora allows me to make a transition to the last of the three formative ideas behind Knowledge Communication, namely that of mutualism.

Mutualism

The sociological framework of LSP was, as mentioned in the *Ontology, Opposition, and Commensalism* section, the trade, the profession, and the discipline. For Knowledge Communication, the sociological framework is the entity in which these are embedded, that is, the knowledge society itself. Among other things this means that Knowledge Communication has freed itself from the dependencies of any one host discipline (e.g., engineering, business, or law), but it does not mean that Knowledge Communication has freed itself from dependencies altogether. And neither does it want to. Knowledge Communication explicitly sees itself as a means to an end, the end being to help the knowledge society thrive and prosper. In the knowledge society/knowledge economy, the primary source of wealth is knowledge; not land, physical labour or the means of production.¹⁰ But knowledge, regardless of how profound or specialized, will not and cannot in itself create societal value. For that to happen, the knowledge produced must be communicated and thus be made available to society in

¹⁰ Among the pioneers for advocating that the distinctive features of (late) postmodern society are the pursuit, the proliferation and the utilization of knowledge we find Fritz Machlup (1962), Daniel Bell (1973), and, perhaps most prominently, Peter Drucker (1989).

one way or the other. So, for a knowledge society, the creation of knowledge is a necessary condition, but it is in itself not a sufficient condition. For the knowledge society to thrive, there are three prerequisites: (a) Being able to produce ever more specialized knowledge, (b) being able to communicate this specialized knowledge, and (c) doing so in such a way that this knowledge may be utilized.

The one predominant challenge of the knowledge society is and will continue to be how to transform ever more specialized knowledge into interactions in order for that knowledge to gain value (outside itself) (see Choo, 1998, p. xvi). And it is exactly that metamorphosis from knowledge via interactions to value, which is also the societal *raison d'être* of Knowledge Communication. This, in effect, frees Knowledge Communication from the spectre of the “handmaiden syndrome” in relation to any one host discipline (say, engineering). If commensalism exists, it is not between Knowledge Communication and (other!) trades, disciplines, or professions (here the relationship is one of mutualism) but between Knowledge Communication and its societal framework.

Research Impetus

Describing Knowledge Communication as I have done, a world view very much in tune with that of North American pragmatism can be said to shine through:

We agree that pragmatism is a well-developed and attractive philosophy for integrating perspectives and approaches. Pragmatism offers an epistemological justification (i.e., via pragmatic epistemic values or standards) and logic (i.e., use the combination of methods and ideas that helps one best frame, address, and provide tentative answers to one’s research question[s]) for mixing approaches and methods. A pragmatist would reject an incompatibility thesis and would claim that research paradigms can remain separate, but they can also be mixed into another research paradigm. He or she also likely would be content with making what Dewey called warranted assertions. (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007, p. 125)

What is perhaps even more important is that because Knowledge Communication is defined the way it is, it is not and cannot be driven by anything but its research questions. It may seem a rather trivial statement, but in fact it is—never the less—crucial, because many disciplines are still driven by a specific theory, a set menu of specific methods or data. Knowledge Communication is independent from the restraints of any one theory or any one method. Showing traits of radical pragmatism, the only obligation accepted by Knowledge Communication is to match the complexity of the research question with modes of examinations

(theories and methods) befitting said complexity. Methodologically speaking, Knowledge Communication finds support in the words of John Law (2004) where he states:

if much of reality is ephemeral and elusive, then we cannot expect single answers. If the world is complex and messy, then at least some of the time we are going to give up on simplicities. But one thing is sure: if we want to think about the messes of reality at all then we are going to have to teach ourselves to think, to practice, to relate, and to know in a new way. (p. 2)

Concurrent with the fact that most products and services of our world become increasingly complex and messy (in terms of all phases from development, over production and distribution to usage, disposal and recycling), multi, inter, and transdisciplinarity (Kocka, 1987) becomes ever more present—in academia as well as in business and industry. The knowledge asymmetries between professions, trades, and disciplines are—due to a mixture of diverging traditions, cultures, identities, as well as the matter studied or produced itself (frogs, fixtures, or finance)—very real indeed. But equally true is the fact that the requirements of the market as well as those of academia make for strange bedfellows. Telecommunication alone could not have come up with the cell phone I use every day. Ergonomics, marketing, linguistics, technical communication, acoustics, and information technology (and more) all contribute to its design and usability. A well-known Danish university nowadays hosts a Department of Management, Politics, and Philosophy—making it an entity which would be virtually unthinkable at a traditional Humboldtian university. But because both the department and the cell phone are thriving—along with, naturally, a wide variety of modern day Chimeras—why not use that as an impetus to turn the tables and look upon knowledge asymmetry not as a barrier but as a vehicle for change? As a vehicle for change, the metaphor to subscribe to would not be one of confrontation but one of co-construction. Along the lines of *do ut des*, the basic currencies of any alliance of this sort are tradeoffs, making the relationship to strive for a de facto mutualistic symbiosis. If we—for argument's sake—leave aside all other parameters than that of knowledge asymmetries in a Knowledge Communication setting, that which is traded is communicable intellectual capital, that is, knowledge-enabling information. Seen from this perspective, a fundamental research impetus would include the following questions:

- What are the social and/or societal, the contextual and/or cultural mechanisms that seem to favor a mutualistic rather than an antagonistic behavior between at least some disciplines, trades, and professions at least some of the time?

- What praxis (be it linguistic, discursive or communicative) may be observed in a successful/unsuccessful Knowledge Communication setting?
- What role if any—because not all problems are communication problems (Windahl, Signizer, & Olson, 2002)—do linguistic, discursive, and communicative practices play in a Knowledge Communication setting?

Summing Up

With a research impetus along these lines, Knowledge Communication is—disciplinarily speaking—imperialistic and postmodern. It is imperialistic in the sense that it sees itself as the capstone of a number of traditional disciplines (e.g., LSP, applied linguistics, and technical communication). It is postmodern in the sense that the rationale of knowledge communication is not: Where do we go to find the answers? But the radically different one, namely: Where do we go to find the questions?

The first step towards finding these questions would be to venture out into the so called real world and honor Geertz's credo that anthropologists don't study villages, they study *in* villages. Or, to rekindle an observation from the laboratory studies, be spurred on by a paradox like this one:

Since the turn of the [last] century, scores of men and women have penetrated deep forests, lived in hostile climates, and weathered hostility, boredom, and disease in order to gather the remnants of so called primitive societies. By contrast to the frequency of these anthropological excursions, relatively few attempts have been made to penetrate the intimacy of life among tribes which are much nearer at hand. (Latour & Woolgar, 1986, p. 17)

But what would such an approach hold in store for us in terms of new insights? Henry Mintzberg (1979) has at least part of the answer:

Theory building seems to require rich description, the richness that comes from anecdote. We uncover all kinds of relationships in our "hard" data, but it is only through the use of this "soft" data that we are able to "explain" them, and explanation is, of course, the purpose of research. I believe that the researcher who never goes near the water, who collects quantitative data from a distance without anecdote to support them, will always have difficulty explaining interesting relationships. (p. 113)

Last but not least: on whom are we to focus our newfound attention? Why not start by taking a closer look at knowledge workers. Why? Because the knowledge

society can only be a knowledge society if the majority of its citizens are knowledge workers (e.g., Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1996). It is not the society as such, nor is it its organizations, institutions, bricks or infrastructures, which is knowledgeable let alone has agency to produce and consume knowledge. On the contrary, it is the prerogative of the individuals that make up the society. Knowledge workers are people who primarily work as 'symbolic analysts', that is, working with and producing symbols rather than, say, physical objects (Reich, 1991). When the translator translates, when the communicator communicates, and when the technical writer writes, then s/he is working with symbols—the symbols of the trades in question being words, texts, and images. And—while we are at it—let us not forget that apart from communicators of various kinds, the label knowledge worker also applies to teachers, human resource officers, lawyers, architects, designers, shipping agents, and so on. And it is especially when appreciating this fact that Knowledge Communication becomes a relevant field of interest far beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.

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