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Communicating (with) Care
A Linguistic Approach to the Study of Doctor-Patient Interactions

Sarah Bigi
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy

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Foreword by Giovanni Gobber

After the pragmatic turn in the late seventies, an increasing interest in the analysis of speech events has produced a large amount of research in applied linguistics. Discourse studies and the analysis of conversation have offered more and more precise criteria for describing communication practices, focusing on the interplay between utterances and the relevant non-linguistic factors in speech events. Thanks to the contributions of descriptive and normative approaches to communicative actions, a new paradigm has emerged in the last decades, which takes into account different activity and dialogue types and makes it possible to elaborate more accurate descriptions of communicative events in specific contexts.

Health communication can profit from an application of a performance-oriented linguistic analysis that pays attention to the role of the various relevant context factors in speech events related to specific activity types. Such an empirical utterance-oriented approach focuses on how semiotic (i.e., not only linguistic) items and processes are used by the interlocutors in the dynamic development of communication practices.

Sarah Bigi proposes a new perspective on communicative interactions between physicians and their patients, in which the interlocutors’ experiences and expectations are reconstructed and their decisive role is considered for the development of a new model of decision making. The decision is progressively developed in a co-operative dialogue, in which the reasons for the decision are found in the patient’s world of knowledge, values and beliefs. The patient is involved in the decision making and this can help her/him adhere to the commitment that follows from the deliberation.

This investigation helps understand the social relevance of linguistic research and encourages the analyst who cares for people and struggles for a better world.

Giovanni Gobber
Full Professor of Linguistics
Dean of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures
Catholic University of Milano
Foreword by Debra Roter

This is an ambitious and thoughtful volume that makes a notable contribution to the literature on medical communication. It is ambitious in attempting to integrate perspectives derived from pragmatics and argumentation theory with those derived from quantitative methods of medical interaction analysis and its prediction of outcomes, an area in which I have done my work.

Dr. Bigi identifies the persistent and important challenges faced by patients and their clinicians in two key care domains, the effective exchange of information within the asymmetric context of the medical monopoly on knowledge and the process of decision making. In addressing these key interactive functions through the lens of argumentative practice she proposes the use of deliberative dialogue as an additional approach useful for a descriptive and normative approach to analysis of decision making. In doing so, she suggests complementary methods to enrich the study of medical interaction with the potential for meaningful synthesis of the medical dialogue derived from often competing perspectives and methods.

The integration of approaches to the study of medical dialogue is not without controversy; despite obvious overlap in the questions asked and problems tackled, methods are seldom combined. Some 25 years ago, my good colleague and friend Richard Frankel and I began a series of conversations regarding qualitative and quantitative research traditions and the professional circles that placed each of us, and our work, within opposing paradigmatic camps (Roter and Frankel, 1992). We found that a parallel could be drawn between our respective research traditions and the systems of open-sea navigation used by Europeans and Truk Islanders described by the cultural anthropologist, Thomas Gladwin (Gladwin, 1964). European navigation uses tools in advance of a journey to plot the course and guide decisions once the journey is underway; the ability to “stay the course” is a testament to the navigator’s skill. The Trukese navigator has no pre-established plan other than experience and information presented through wave patterns that unfold during the voyage.

The value of Gladwin’s analysis is that it considers both context and outcome as determinants of methodological utility and allows that map-making skills are as irrelevant to the Trukese navigator as the ability to read local wave patterns is to the European navigator. Methods of research, like those of navigation, are open to description in their own terms, and should be judged on the extent to which they succeed in asking and answering questions that go to the heart of a matter. And yet, paradigmatic worldviews that promote mutual exclusivity lead to lost opportunities for innovative synthesis and the rewards of discovery and insight.

Dr. Bigi uses an interdisciplinary perspective to broaden the reader’s understanding of the way in which communicative exchanges in the medical context shape meaning, influence understanding and lead to actionable decisions. As a result, this book makes a meaningful contribution to the address of the formidable challenges of synthesis across paradigmatic boundaries.
References


Debra Roter, DrPH
University Distinguished Service Professor
Department of Health, Behavior and Society
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
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