

NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES AT WORK

Talking and Transitions

Edited by Jo Angouri, Meredith Marra
and Janet Holmes

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Introduction: Negotiating Boundaries at Work

Jo Angouri, Meredith Marra and Janet Holmes

I. Theorising *transitions*

This edited collection focuses on transition talk and boundary-crossing discourse in the modern workplace context.¹ Transitions form a normal part of life and the term typically denotes mobility and change. This includes movement across physical/spatiotemporal borders, life stages, intellectual or social boundaries. Transitions are particularly visible in the modern globalised workplace; the concept of a ‘job for life’ is outdated, and employees move between jobs, countries and even professions or industries during their working lives. Workforce mobility is particularly intense within and between national and international urban workplaces (Eriksson and Lindgren 2009) and career journeys involve increasingly complex paths, for both white and blue collar workers. The changing employment market also means frequent boundary crossing into new linguistic environments and new ways of doing work. This affects the ways in which professional identities are constructed, in a fast-paced, fluid and dynamic context. A range of disciplinary areas, theoretical stances, and methodological traditions have addressed the dynamic nature of transitions. Transitions involving crossing and operating at the interface of one or more geographical borders have been studied by management studies and organisational behaviour scholars, most notably the implications of boundary-crossing activities for role performance and team dynamics. International business studies have also analysed the significance of the use of multiple languages in the workplace (e.g. Piekkari and Westney 2017) while work in sociology and education has probed the complexity of the phenomenon (e.g. Duchescher 2009; Pickles and Smith 2005; Avelino and Rotmans 2009). Despite this, transitions remain an under-researched area in sociolinguistics in general and workplace discourse in particular. This publication addresses this gap.

In sociolinguistics, transitions have long been conceptualised as linear and sequential or as moving between a place/language X to a place/language Y. This, however, does not capture the dynamics of mobility in modern society. Vertovec (2007) writing on the ‘diversification of diversity’ or ‘superdiversity’, a term that has

become widely cited and popular, foregrounds the pace of mobility, the fluidity of transitions, and the multiple spatiotemporal journeys that more accurately represent population flows quantitatively and qualitatively. Transitions have become common, unpredictable, multiple and diverse. Migration out of choice, opportunity or necessity (e.g. fleeing from war zones or for better career prospects) is affecting and will continue to affect large numbers of people from all parts of the world. This is not only debated in academic circles; the dynamics and challenges associated with migration, in the broadest sense, are prominent in public discourses and, at the time of writing, Europe is a case in point. Discourses of economic migration, integration and pressures on the 'receiving' societies proliferate. While one narrative associates migration and mobility with growth and wealth, superdiversity is not always portrayed in a positive light (see for example Wodak 2015 on the rise of far right); fear-based narratives associate migration with pressures on the welfare system, loss of employment for the host society, crime and erosion of values that threaten the imagined homogeneity and perceived social cohesion. In the context of these contrasting narratives, the workplace becomes a contested area, split between those who are 'in' and those who are attempting to gain access and are often commodified as a resource, brain power, knowledge worker, manual labour and/or a burden. These discourses feed into ideologies at a societal level and are in their turn reiterated or resisted in workplace interaction.

The modern workplace is and will continue to be transient and diverse and this requires new ways of thinking about the labour market, professional trajectories and also the multiple languages that form the everyday linguistic landscape in most workplace settings. Linguistic diversity and language change constitute traditional foci in (socio)linguistic enquiry. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has foregrounded the dynamics of language choice, code-switching (e.g. Auer 2013) and the relationship between multilingual practice and identity, while variationist studies (Eckert 2012) have provided valuable insights on language use, language change and the associated social evaluations (e.g. Lippi-Green 1997). At the same time, postmodern approaches on (multilingual) language use move from focusing on 'language' or languages to the speaker and their multiple styles or repertoires (Rampton 2014, 2011). The concept of 'linguaging' used by Swain (1985) aims to capture the dynamic process of 'using language to make meaning' (Swain 2006: 96), and terms such as 'code meshing' (Canagarajah 2007) similarly attempt to capture multilingual practice beyond code-switching or code-mixing which typically see languages as distinct entities.

The dynamics of globalisation and the complexity of transitions have important implications for negotiating professional identity and teamwork in the modern workplace. In our volume, we pay special attention to the strategies that individuals adopt for navigating multiple physical or ideological boundaries (language, workplace, country), and we suggest that this process is not linear but is rather in constant negotiation. In particular, the volume problematises the enactment of identities, the deconstruction of 'culture', the negotiation of norms, and the process of moving from the periphery to integrating into new groups.

These transitions are enacted linguistically in the situated 'here and now' of workplace discourse. Institutions as well as the broader sociopolitical and economic environment are 'talked into being' (Heritage 1984: 290) in situated interaction. In

various professional events, from job interviews to business meetings, the interactants negotiate belonging and index group membership (or the opposite). This has serious implications for being accepted as ‘one of us’, that is, choosing whether or not to partake in the group’s shared norms. Beyond the micro enactment of transitions, the negotiation between the individual and the group is visible at community level. Here, group norms are brought into scrutiny in terms of organisational shared meanings. In this first dedicated volume on transitions, our interest is the process of socialising into a new group and how individuals reflect on their own understanding of how things work, simultaneously negotiating their place and (re)creating group norms. This process is multilayered and includes the ongoing redefinition of personal, social and professional identities (Blommaert 2007; Eckert 2008; and a model encapsulating these constraints proposed in Holmes et al. 2011).

2. Structure and content

The contributors in the volume represent the range of work currently being undertaken and highlight the dynamic nature of traversing boundaries while drawing on diverse methodologies and theoretical traditions (e.g. Communities of Practices, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Ecolinguistics, Multimodality and Conversation Analysis) and datasets including interviews, interaction and narratives. The volume is structured in two parts: Part I focuses on crossing *into* a work environment or profession and negotiating gatekeeping events, while Part II puts the magnifying glass on crossings *within* a profession.

In the first part, Kerekes, Kirilova, Kuśmierczyk-O’Connor, Reissner-Roubicek, Van De Mierop and Schnurr, and Losa and Filliettaz draw on the relationship between macro-level social structures or constraints and micro-level dynamic, fluid interaction in specific workplaces or communities of practice. Macro-level constraints range from the pressures of conflicting ideologies in multilingual contexts to the influence of established institutional practices and globally recognised leadership characteristics on highly structured discursive frameworks such as employment and appraisal interviews.

Macro-level constraints that are reflected in gatekeeping events can be identified in the form of societal norms and stereotypes. Kirilova and Kerekes both point to the negative outcomes of such stereotypes for potential employees from non-Western cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Often realised in the form of widespread negative public discourse, these stereotypes put great pressure on job candidates to challenge gatekeeping behaviours, which implicitly draw on such discourses. Negotiating a credible identity as a potentially valuable employee within a negative societal framework is a major issue for those attempting to access the labour market. Focusing on the Canadian context, Kerekes shows how important it is for job-seeking internationally educated professionals to demonstrate their ability to make such transitions into existing communities. Examining how individual attitudes, circumstances and adaptation to Canadian life have influenced their varied employment trajectories, she suggests that reasons for failure are frequently ideologically based rather than attributable to lack of English fluency as is often claimed. The link between macro-level stereotypes

and lack of success in micro-level job interview contexts is evident. Kirilova and Kerekes, like others in the volume, question the relevance of cultural, national or ethnic differences in accounting for communication problems or misunderstandings, noting that 'culture' is often appropriated as a convenient shorthand for explaining away complex issues.

Examining this issue from a different perspective and using Multimodal Interaction Analysis, Kuśmierczyk-O'Connor focuses on micro-level features within the gatekeeping job interview, which facilitate a transition to the workplace. Her analysis demonstrates the intersection of macro-level workplace ideologies with micro-level professional and social identity construction. The ability to synthesise relevant workplace discourses must be demonstrated in dynamic face-to-face interaction drawing on a range of meaning-making resources, including speech, gesture and gaze, as well as written text.

Reissner-Roubicek also problematises the ways in which university graduates negotiate expectations of articulating teamwork experiences in job interviews. She shows that graduates often fail to properly read the cues and demonstrate understanding of the expected norms. She focuses on the analysis of naturally occurring interaction and like others in the volume she argues for a more dynamic understanding of gatekeeping discourses.

Consistent with a model that examines how interaction at the micro-level enacts, modifies, complexifies and contests such constraints, Van De Mieroop and Schnurr analyse how a leader constructs her role differently in response to diverse contextual features within apparently similarly structured appraisal interviews. The joint micro-level discursive negotiation of roles and identities has important macro-level outcomes, including the fact that it determines what will remain on the institutional record (macro-level constraint) of the organisation.

Finally, Losa and Filliettaz take a different approach and focus on the process of transition from being the apprentice to full membership in a community of practice. Detailed analysis of negotiated positionings in one-to-one interactions suggests the extent to which newcomers must acquire shared meanings in the process of moving from the periphery in order to integrate into and become legitimate members of a new workplace community. Losa and Filliettaz's chapter turns the focus to crossings within professions; this is further elaborated in the second part of the collection. To sum up, the chapters in the first part argue against a narrow and static conceptualisation of gatekeeping discourse and show the complex relationship between macro-level discourses and micro-level interaction.

In the second part, Bührig and Rehbein, Fabricius, Franziskus, Suni and Choi take a closer look at the complexities of the process of the transition. The chapters focus on the move from potential, peripheral or marginal membership in a workplace or community to fully legitimised core membership, with the challenge of acquiring some understanding of the predominantly implicit social values and taken-for-granted practices entailed in that integration process.

Bührig and Rehbein draw on biographical narratives of employees of an international enterprise to explore the perceived value of multilingualism for commercial enterprises and the experiences of the employees. The link between the international global and

the local or individual level is again apparent. Introducing the concept of ‘patience’, Bührig and Rehbein demonstrate the importance of opportunities to respond to the experience of being an individual employee in an international enterprise. They identify three different types of discourse that employees used to reflect on their workplace experiences, indicating how at the micro-level of face-to-face interaction, workplace narratives, in particular, function to provide distraction and relief from the pressures of the international globalised workplace.

Continuing the focus on the global multilingual space, Fabricius problematises the tensions faced by a Danish academic in the effort to reconcile the pressures of the global-national vs. the local-workplace norms. She explores the tension by focusing on the struggle and conflict created by the demand to perform in English in international professional contexts. Fabricius shows how commitment to the enactment of a local Danish identity generates a constant negotiation between the two levels and proposes the concept of a ‘space between’. This is consistent with the notion of a multilayered analytical model (see Holmes et al. 2011), which accounts for how micro-level interaction, negotiating aspects of personal, social and professional identities, provides one means of resolving the tensions between the demands of the local academic workplace and the global international (academic or other) community.

Language ideologies are also evident at the micro-level of workplace interaction, as illustrated in Franziskus’s research on Luxembourg cross-border workers. In line with the examination of the relationship between macro-level constraints and micro-level interaction, this chapter illustrates the ways in which employees manage the conflicting constraints of the multilingual workplace to negotiate their own positioning, drawing on congenial language ideologies to protect and promote their own place within the multilingual workplace environment.

Also illustrating the tensions between international or global pressures and local level workplace practices, Suni explores the interactions between the Finnish social system, the continuous changes in the employment environment, and the micro-level options and opportunities available for the individual. As she notes, the globalising work market is an obvious environmental factor influencing the general dynamics of immigration, but it is at the local work level of communities of practice that individual immigrants negotiate their positions in daily life. For instance, workplace language policies at the macro-level within organisations can either support or restrict the use of different languages at work and thus the quality of workplace experience for individuals. Both Suni’s research and Franziskus’s study illustrate the negotiation of workplace transitions and the relationship with language choice. Suni notes the dangers of ‘a spiral of peripheral participation’ for those who lack sufficient or socially relevant language skills. Developing competence in the dominant workplace language or lingua franca is a crucial step in facilitating the transition from peripheral to core workplace membership and in the construction of a convincing and credible professional identity. And Franziskus’s detailed analysis of discussions of language practices among cross-border workers illustrates how in practice they linguistically negotiate their positions within new workplaces. She identifies a range of strategies for managing this transition, sometimes conforming to and sometimes contesting local norms in order to carve out a legitimate and acceptable membership position for themselves.

Addressing membership as a contested concept, Choi focuses on the emergence of a new and inherently interdisciplinary field, namely systems biology. As the field develops, so too do the norms about how to demonstrate membership and how to enact an identity, which is in line with shared understandings of the field. Rather than using multiple languages, this enactment relies on discourses which reflect particular sets of expertise, that is, alignment with 'wet' and 'dry' sciences. To belong means recognising and respecting differences. Against a backdrop of a field in flux, the norms for achieving a relevant identity also mean exhibiting the flexibility required to manage the transition from separate fields to a combined approach, while still anchoring yourself in a specific tradition.

To conclude, the chapters in the second part unpack multilingualism at work as well as the multilayered manifestations of social and cultural norms and show the ways in which they are negotiated in different events in the workplace. All chapters demonstrate rich and varied understandings of how complex social and cultural identities are discursively enacted and negotiated in the multicultural urban setting and abundantly illustrate some of the many ways in which workplace participants discursively manage complex transitions through their engagement in workplace talk.

3. Moving forward: bringing transitions to the fore

As the workplace is changing, unpacking the dynamics and implications of the multiple crossings and transitions becomes more and more relevant to the core of the work of workplace discourse analysts. The term 'transitions' has been used as a metaphor or umbrella for capturing transience and fluidity in the workplace. As the chapters in this volume indicate, however, this does not do justice to the complexity of transitions, nor does it contribute to work that is taking place in other disciplinary areas in social sciences. A multi-method sociolinguistic analysis can shed light on the perceived realities of transitions with(in) the multilingual workplace and the subtle ways in which they are linguistically enacted in different corporate, medical or educational contexts. It offers a way to analyse negotiations of power (im)balance and hierarchy in professional contexts without, *a priori*, negative evaluations superimposed by the researcher. This volume also shows the relevance of unpacking transitions for understanding social and professional identities at work and the process of negotiating membership into multiple communities in professional settings.

Identity and coterminous notions such as role and self in everyday workplace practice have attracted the interest of workplace analysts. As the field of workplace discourse is coming of age, established theoretical approaches and methodological traditions have built a rich body of empirical and evidence based studies. These different approaches focus on different layers of meaning and have provided the tools and metalanguage for tackling abstract concepts and phenomena. This is undoubtedly an achievement for the young field of workplace discourse, and the contributors in this volume showcase the existent diversity of views. At the same time, these multiple views often remain insulated within specific areas of enquiry. In this volume, we aim to create space for dialogue and for bringing different approaches together. Instead of taking one single view for the study of transitions, we seek to pave the way for plurality

of voices and cross-fertilisation of ideas. Further work is necessary to address the complex realities of the modern workplace, and challenging established orthodoxies is a condition for theoretical innovation. This can only be achieved through collaboration and multi-method enquiry and this volume aims to raise issues of common concern future studies can address.

Note

1. The original concept for this book grew out of the work of a panel organised by the editors in the Sociolinguistic Symposium in Berlin (2014). Several of the panellists have contributed to this volume and others have supported us by providing generous feedback. We thank them on behalf of the authors. We also thank Kate Burian, the anonymous reviewers and Edinburgh University Press for their support throughout the process.

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Part I Transitions *to* a Profession