Register and Professional Discourse: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Professional discourse has long been a topic of interest among scholars in fields such as Linguistics, Communication Studies and Organizational Studies, as well as beyond the academy, for professionals seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their workplace communication. The term *professional discourse* can be used to refer to the specialized communicative practices that occur within professional settings. From this broad view, the notion of professional discourse can be applied when looking at communicative practices within and across a wide range of contexts (including, but certainly not being limited to, academia, business, healthcare and law (Bhatia, 2004)).

The study of professional discourse tends not to be concerned just with describing and documenting the (linguistic) features that constitute such communicative practices (though it can of course involve this), but such work also often sets out to examine how such discourse is shaped by institutional norms, power structures and goals. While professional discourse represents, as noted, a long-held interest among scholars and professionals alike (spanning several decades), in recent years the focus of much work in this area can be characterized by a theme of change; namely, understanding how particular changes in society, such as particular social movements (e.g., globalization, neoliberalism, etc.) and technological advancements (e.g., digital communication, generative AI, etc.), as well as the emergence of and changes to practices within certain professions, continuously shape and redefine professional communicative practices, including giving rise to emerging and hybrid modes, genres, and so forth. As well as being the object of study, such changes can also drive methodological innovation, by necessitating that we modify our approaches to discourse, or even that we develop new ones, in order to give as complete and up-to-date picture of the discourse as possible.

Studies of professional discourse therefore share a broad focus on professional communicative practices and the contextual factors that give rise to and continually shape these. However, beyond this unifying concern, studies in this area can otherwise by characterized in terms of

variance; they address a wide range of contexts (professional and cultural) and text types, and as such they apply a wide range of methodological approaches and theoretical perspective (see Darics and Koller (2018) for an overview). Among these approaches and perspectives, the notion of register can offer a particularly insightful lens for exploring how language varies systematically according to context and purpose. Taking this as its starting point, the aim of this special issue is to showcase what a register perspective can bring to the study of professional discourse. It does so by bringing together a collection of original studies which explore the register of professional communicative practices across a range of contexts and text types. This introduction provides context for this special issue by first giving a more detailed overview of professional discourse, before considering the advantages of adopting a register perspective to study it. We then narrow our focus to the papers making up this special issue, describing their objectives and contributions.

Introduced briefly in the previous section, as an object of study, professional discourse encompasses the language and communicative practices that can be associated with specific professional domains. It can involve potentially any communicative mode (e.g., spoken, written, digital, multimodal) or genre (e.g., ranging from formal genres such as official letters and contracts, to informal interactions on social media or conversations taking place around the watercooler). Importantly, viewed through a broadly social constructionist lens, professional discourse can be viewed as having a dialectical relationship with the contexts in which it takes place (Gunnarsson 2009). In other words, such discourse does not not merely reflect professional practices, but actively shapes these, in turn creating and sustaining the very social and institutional structures within which it takes place (Sarangi & Roberts 1999).

Research has highlighted several key features of professional discourse, such as its goal-oriented nature, its dependence upon specialized terminology and genre conventions, and its embeddedness within particular institutional frameworks. As an example, within medical settings, clinical notes, diagnostic reports and patient consultations serve distinct communicative purposes but are broadly unified by their role in facilitating patient care (Brookes & Hunt 2021). Similarly, discourse taking place as part of the legal process has been observed to rely on the use of precise terminology and formulaic structures to ensure clarity and legal enforceability

(Coulthard et al. 2017). Such examples illustrate how professional discourse is both context-sensitive and purpose-driven. Even language use that is not so explicitly task-oriented, such as phatic communication, can serve a broader purpose of fulfilling institutional goals, as evidenced by the importance of expressions of politeness to attenuating to team building (Chałupnik 2024). Indeed, this kind of phatic communication has been connected to the timely accomplishment of tasks in high-stakes and high-pressure situations, such as in emergency care (Atkins & Chałupnik 2021).

Studies of professional discourse often draw on interdisciplinary perspectives, bringing to bear insights from fields as disparate as Linguistics, Sociology, Psychology and Organizational Studies. Within more linguistically oriented disciplines, popular approaches of note include genre analysis, conversation analysis and interactional sociolinguistics. While such approaches have significantly advanced our understanding of professional discourse, a limitation of their implementation is that they can involve prioritizing a focus on particular aspects of communication, such as describing textual structure or accounting for the influence of given sociolinguistic variables, perhaps at the expense of accounting more fully for the relationships that exist between attested features of language and contextual variables. This is where register perspectives, which entail analyzing systematically the linguistic variation that exhibits across contexts, can complement these and other approaches to give a potentially more comprehensive account of discourse in professional settings.

In fact, adopting a register perspective can offer several advantages to the study of professional discourse. As noted, it can enable a systematic analysis of linguistic variation across professional contexts, providing linguistic evidence through which analysts can observe the ways in which language use is adapted in order to meet the demands of a given communicative situation. A register perspective can also aid in bridging the analytical gap between micro-level linguistic features and macro-level contextual variables, thereby helping to illuminate how professional discourse, as noted, can both reflect and reinforce institutional structures and power relations. Furthermore, register analysis also has much to offer to efforts to chart new and developing professional genres, including those that emerge from and with social, technological and institutional developments.

The five papers included in this special issue represent a broad range of professional contexts, including business case studies, legal contracts, architectural design and access statements, online meetings, and academic blogs. They also employ a wide variety of research methods: while most rely on a corpus of texts for their analysis, there is a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, including manual coding using the Appraisal Framework (Martin & White 2005), situational analysis (Biber & Conrad 2019), frequency (at the word, n-gram, and semantic level), text dispersion keyness (Egbert & Biber 2019), and multidimensional and cluster analysis (Biber 1988; Thompson et al. 2017). Taken together, the papers showcase the possibilities for research in these somewhat under-represented registers.

The first paper, "A register approach to specialized word list creation: Using keywords to supplement the Contracts Word List" by Kyra Larsen, McKayla Lindman, Brett Hashimoto, Elizabeth Hanks, and Jesse Egbert, contributes not only to the literature on word list creation (with several innovative methods used) but also adds register as a meaningful component to list design. The corpus used for the study includes 50 contracts from 54 different subregisters (total of 2,700 texts and nearly 48 million words). A thorough domain analysis (Egbert et al. 2022) was conducted to ensure the representativeness of the corpus. They position their lists as important for Business English as a Lingua Franca and Legal English as a Lingua Franca, and indicate that both English language learners and novice users of Business and Legal English alike can benefit from these lists. The language used in contracts is notorious for its specialized uses (e.g., "legalese"), and the specialized lists are important since users of contracts generally specialize in one area of contacts, depending on the type of business they are employed at and their position in that business.

First, their study highlights the importance of more fine-grained approach to registers (they build off of a general Contracts Word List to create specialized lists for 54 contract subregisters). Learners can first work with the more general Contracts Word List and then work with a specialized list depending on their area of specialization within contracts. Second, they use well-grounded and innovative methods for creating word lists, but also draw on methods for register analysis, most notably including a situational analysis of the register of contracts as well as the

54 subregisters. They incorporated keyness analysis as a component of list design. In particular, they used text dispersion keyness, which focuses on the range of texts in which a particular word is used in relation to a reference corpus, instead of using the frequency of occurrence of the word. In order to validate their word lists, they use both traditional techniques (i.e., coverage in various domains) and a register-based technique of situational analysis, identifying the participants, topical domain, and communicative purpose for each of the 54 subregisters and determining whether the words on the list correspond to those situational characteristics. The results demonstrate important implications for the impact that register has on the design of word lists, such as the varying lengths of the word lists for the 54 subregisters. They also illustrate the importance of specialized meanings of words that emerge from their word lists, such as words with meanings that are different from common usage (e.g., reasonable) and acronyms.

In "Evaluative expression in architectural practice: An analysis of UK Design and Access Statements", Sara Lahlouhi and Hilary Nesi explore the under-researched register of Design and Access Statements, a register used in the architectural workplace but not often covered in academic programs for architecture students. They explore architects' use of evaluative language, using Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Framework, but provide important modifications to the framework based on their data. One key aspect of the evaluative language used in this register is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human entities (e.g., buildings), which the authors argue increases the reader's engagement with the design plan. However, they needed to modify the existing framework in order to capture this aspect of the discourse. Namely, they added the categories of NON-HUMAN AFFECT and NON-HUMAN JUDGMENT, showing how the Appraisal Framework can be modified for new registers.

The data come from a larger corpus of 79 design and access statements that all contained a "design principles" subsection. Length of the design principles subsection was taken into account and then 10 files were randomly selected for the fine-grained, qualitative analysis that characterizes the application of the Appraisal Framework. The resulting sample contained 7,154 words. Segments were tagged using the UAM corpus tool, and multiple codes were applied when the segment had more than one aspect of the appraisal framework. The two coders coded separately and met to reach consensus where there were discrepancies.

Although the small sample size should be taken into account in interpreting the findings, the results show that the frequencies of Appraisal Framework categories differed substantially from that found in research articles, which has important implications for the teaching of the register of Design and Access Statements. For example, COMPOSITION was the most common APPRECIATION resource in the data Lahlouhi and Nesi analysed, while it was the least common in Zhang and Cheung (2023), due to the focus in Design Access Statements on the architect's use of design principles in their compositions.

Philippe Millot's paper, "One hundred years of managerial expertise in the business case studies: a diachronic analysis of engagement features in experts' responses," also examines engagement but in a very different register, that of business case studies. The study takes a historical perspective on changes within this register between 1922–1929, 1961–1979, and 2008–2023. The corpus consists of 67 texts, 15 each from the two earlier time periods and 37 from the last time period, all from the *Harvard Business Review*. The analysis uses semantic tagging (Rayson, 2008) as a starting point, and then added features that designate explicit writer/reader presence, including first and second person pronouns and direct questions and asides (identified through punctuation).

The findings reveal that the register of business case studies has evolved substantially over time, both in terms of linguistic features and in terms of situational characteristics and discourse level moves. There is a major increase in the use of most of the stance categories, particularly boosters, as well as items related to thought/belief and likelihood from the earliest period (1922-29) to the middle period (1961-79). There are several situational characteristics driving this change, notably the authorship of business case studies, which shifted from single to multiple authors, including the editor in the middle period. The greater use of linguistic features associated with likelihood in particular is attributed to the need to express the analysis of cases with some possibility of interpretation, due to the multiple perspectives displayed in the later time period. The author also indicates that the register overall shifted to a less formal tone, accounting for the greater use of thought/belief language, more often associated with spoken registers. There is a slight decline in the use of these features between the 1960s and 70s to the

2000s, which the author attributes to the lack of editorial voice in the latest period, which marks a shift from the middle period.

While discourse-level moves were not the focus of investigation in this particular study, as Millot points out, "the expert comments sections are clearly delineated from the narratives in the middle and late periods, [but] they could not be identified in the early period, since … they were diluted". This likely is related to the changes in authorship from the early period and undoubtedly has an impact on the greater use of features of engagement in the later periods as well. This paper contributes to diachronic studies of register analysis as well as to a greater understanding of the particular register of business case studies.

Next, "Exploring research-based news: A register perspective" by Niall Curry and Pascual Pérez-Paredes explores the emergent register of academic blogs. In an experimental use of MD and cluster analysis, the authors examine a subset of texts in this register from two disciplinary backgrounds (science and politics), all focused on the climate crisis. As the authors indicate, academic blog posts are a growing register but with limited studies examining their nature. They tend to be topic rather than discipline-driven, and the topic of the climate crisis is interdisciplinary and of relevance to global science communication.

The corpus consists of texts from *The Conversation*, a site that publishes texts on academic research on range of subjects, intended (and read by) mostly non-academic audiences. A total of 625 blogs were included in the analysis, 383 from Politics and Society and 242 from Science and Technology, again, all with the topic of climate. Using a text-linguistic approach, the authors highlight their novel use of MDA, in that it is not used to identify variation across previously categorized registers but rather to investigate inter-register variation. In addition, they use cluster analysis to identify text types that help to define the communicative purposes of academic news blog posts from *The Conversation*.

The MD analysis identified three dimensions: 1) Interpersonal Argument vs. Numerical Evidence 2) Narrative vs. Expository and 3) Historical vs. Abstract. Within these dimensions there was a pattern of disciplinary variation such that Science and Technology blogs used more of the

features of the positive sides of these dimensions (at least 50% of the texts in that category), while over 50% of the texts from Politics and Society used more of the features on the negative side of the dimensions. This is somewhat surprising when we consider the respective disciplinary families that these texts come from, Physical Sciences and Social Sciences, which might be expected to pattern oppositely particularly for the first two dimensions. This suggests a different communicative style than found in research articles in these disciplines. However, it is also important to note that a substantial minority of the texts from each disciplinary background showed use of the features on the opposite side of the dimension, suggesting a good deal of variation within each subcategory of texts. In this respect, the cluster analysis helps capture some of that variation by identifying four text types: 1) rhetorical narratives; 2) reasoned abstractions; 3) empirical storytelling; and 4) quantitative reflections. These text types reveal to a larger extent the multiple communicative purposes found in the data, providing insight into how writers in this register communicate their research in ways that are more accessible to non-specialist audiences. As the authors indicate in their discussion, a broader investigation, including texts from other sites associated with this particular situation of use, would elucidate whether these patterns are seen more broadly in this emergent register.

The final paper of this issue, "Doing meetings online: understanding variation in virtual workplace meetings", by Sandrine Peraldi, Chris Fitzgerald, Geraldine Mark, Justin McNamara, Dawn Knight and Anne O'Keeffe, contributes to our understanding of the relatively new (or at least, relatively newly widespread) register of online meetings. They use the Interactional Variation Online (IVO) corpus, which is a collection of 19 video and audio recorded virtual meetings held between July 2021 and July 2022. It contains over 16 hours of meetings, amounting to about 168,000 words.

The authors emphasize several important situational characteristics that vary within this register to frame their study and motivate their research questions, including organizational differences in the leading of meetings and engagement among participants. They also explore variation related to individual speaker-chairs. The situational analysis of this register also emphasizes the distinct situational characteristics related to the use of technology. These characteristics necessarily impact the linguistic choices of the participants.

Notably, nominations (calling participants by name) are extremely frequent in virtual meetings due to the fact that gaze cannot be used in the same way as it is in face-to-face meetings. In addition, participants used hand waving at the end of meetings to signal leave taking, which would not be expected in face-to-face meetings. Other features at both the linguistic and discourse level showed similarities with face-to-face workplace meetings, including the sequence of functional phases: 1) the premeeting preamble; 2) the 'official' meeting opening; 3) the core meeting phase of agenda discussion which follows a cyclical pattern starting with the assignment of an agenda item to a participant and ending with a transition to the next item; and 4) the closing stage.

The authors conclude by situating the register of online meetings within the larger register of workplace discourse, emphasizing intra-register variation due to organizational and individual variation. The paper also contributes to the growing body of multimodal corpus analyses, and shows how linguistic and multimodal elements can be combined to provide new insights into spoken registers. In particular, the methods section offers a detailed description of how the team used various tools to transcribe and analyze the multimodal data, providing a guide for other researchers wishing to incorporate multimodal analysis into their register studies.

Taken together, then, the studies in this issue demonstrate some of the key features of research on professional discourse described earlier, as well as the aforementioned benefits of applying a register perspective to this area of study. In particular, they show how a register perspective can help us to understand and define what distinguishes particular genres of professional discourse, including in comparison to other genres within the same profession (e.g., Lahlouhi and Nesi), as well as to institutional register more broadly (e.g., Peraldi et al.). The papers also demonstrate how register-based research might be applied in professional contexts, for example by supporting professionals' reflections on, and development and training of, their communicative practices (e.g., Larsen et al.). The theme of change, which as we saw characterizes much of the focus of research on professional discourse broadly, also refracted into the studies presented here. This included changes in professional and broader authorship practices (e.g., Millot) and technological changes arising due to societal shifts (e.g., Peraldi et al.), as well as change in

terms of the emergence of a register of professional discourse (e.g., Curry & Pérez-Paredes). As we described earlier, the reality of variation can drive methodological innovation, and it was indeed the case that confronting existing approaches with new, or at least newly studied, genres and registers required the modification of existing approaches (e.g., Lahlouhi & Nesi; Curry & Pérez-Paredes), as well as the adoption of mixed methods (e.g., Peraldi et al.). These methodological details highlight, on the one hand, the aforementioned capacity of professional discourse, as comprising genres that are ever-evolving, to test and put strain on our existing approaches, and one other hand, the flexibility of register-based approaches to continue to develop and complement other methodologies.

Looking ahead, professional discourse promises to continue to play a key role in organizing social life, and as such it also promises to change, and to change with, the world at large. We hope that the articles in this issue therefore inspire readers to look, and to 'keep looking', at professional discourse, at to adopt a register perspective when they do.

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