

## LINGUISTICS APPLIED TO BUSINESS CONTEXTS – AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK STUDER

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**ReVEL – Can we consider Linguistics applied to business contexts as a field of Linguistics on its own? What’s the outlook for this field in Europe?**

**Patrick Studer** – It depends a little on what you understand by ‘linguistics’ when you speak of ‘linguistics applied to business contexts’ and on the perspective from where you look at the phenomenon. The study of language in business contexts is highly interdisciplinary and builds on various (sub-)disciplines within economics as well as the humanities and social sciences. If we agree to locate the principled investigation of what goes on communicatively in businesses within communication studies, then we need to take into account the full range of written and spoken ‘products’ of an enterprise – from marketing, to internal communication, to business reports, team meetings, manager-employee interaction, sales talk, etc. The study of these diverse communicative events has a long tradition in business communication studies, communication psychology, organizational psychology, and media studies. So, in a first step, we need to ask ourselves: Where does linguistics proper begin? Where does it end? The question about defining the field is particularly important when looking at the problem from an applied perspective, which, more than any other perspective, inspires itself by the many disciplines it is surrounded by.

If we look at your question from inside linguistics, the most likely sub-discipline that can give you answers to your question is applied linguistics (on the

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<sup>1</sup> Webpage: <https://home.zhaw.ch/~stup/>  
ReVEL, v. 11, n. 21, 2013

distinction between ‘linguistics applied’ and ‘applied linguistics’ see WIDDOWSON, 2001). Applied linguistics can be broadly understood as a field of study that researches language with relevance to real-world issues. Applied linguistics, in other words, is concerned with practical applications of language studies and focuses, unlike other areas in linguistics, on contexts where language appears as a problem in the real world. It is particularly this problem-driven approach to language study that makes applied linguistics an attractive theoretical and practical foundation for the study of how language use in the business context can be developed and optimized (on the problem-driven approach see GRABE, 2010:40-41; also STREVENS, 1992). Kaplan (2010:8-9; based on GRABE, 2004) identifies thirteen ‘specialties’ of applied linguistics, some of which seem particularly pertinent to business contexts. Of particular importance to the study of language in business contexts are the themes linguistic diversity, policy and planning and professional writing.

Some of the specialties identified by Kaplan have developed more quickly than others and, in the meantime, become independent fields of inquiry. We can, in a first step, divide the various applied linguistic research activities along the written-spoken continuum. At the written end of the continuum, the focus lies on the implementation of applied linguistic studies to the training of specialized writing skills (*how-to-literature*). These studies may focus on specific genres or text types (e.g., randomly, corporate annual reports in RUTHERFORD, 2005; KLIMOVA, 2004) and provide theoretical insight that can be incorporated into writing guides (e.g. GREENHALL, 2010). Such studies, guides (and possible trainings resulting from them) may arise from specific occasions (e.g. the introduction of a new reporting system by a company) and be tailor-made to address a company’s problems. Along the oral end of the continuum, applied linguistic research may proceed in a similar needs-driven way, offering insight into how the various forms and kinds of business interactions are planned and managed linguistically and communicatively (e.g. through the empirical studies of leadership communication skills in local contexts, such as AKHTER; KHAN; HASSAN, 2009; also see BARRETT, 2006).

I would like, in the following, to take a closer look at the area of language policy and planning in business contexts as this area not only addresses both oral and written dimensions but also includes the theme of linguistic diversity. Language policy and planning has become a particularly powerful trend in applied linguistics in recent years. I will discuss briefly one trendsetting policy-making institution in

Europe – the European Commission – and review its recent and ongoing policy activities at the interface of applied linguistics and business. The European Commission, as a case in point, allows us to generalize discursive trends currently active in the world of business in Europe and to acknowledge their potential for applied linguistics.

The European Commission, more than any other European institution, is concerned with cultural and linguistic diversity from an economic perspective. Since the early days of the *European Coal and Steel Community* and the *European Economic Community*, the main aim of the European Union has been the integration of the European market and, indirectly, to counteract linguistic, cultural, or nation-state fragmentation. In this context, the European Union developed various policy portfolios in the course of its existence so as to encourage and facilitate collaboration between businesses across Europe (see DAVIGNON, 1970). It is not least in the light of such activities that the EU's slogan of the new millennium – *unity in diversity* – must be interpreted.

With regard to languages, *unity in diversity* meant two things: greater intercultural and multilingual exchange *and* greater use of important trade languages. The effort towards European linguistic integration culminated, for a brief period, in the establishment of a policy area 'multilingualism' and the appointment of a commissioner for multilingualism in 2007 (Leonard Orban). The establishment of multilingualism as a separate policy area in the commission echoed a global change the economies of the world were (and still are) undergoing. Enterprises in Europe, small and large, have increasingly been faced with need to use more than one language at work, to use English as a lingua franca, and to deal with an increasingly culturally diverse workforce. As a result, the language side of business has been given more widespread and systematic policy attention. Multilingual environments, originally perceived as a trade barrier, are increasingly seen as an opportunity when harnessed successfully.

So, when attempting to answer your question about the independence of an applied linguistic field concerned with business contexts, let us look at the question from the perspective of concrete language policy efforts that have been made in this field in recent years. At European level, the first decade of the new millennium saw the publication of a number of important studies commissioned by the European Union, which were conducted in the spirit of the Lisbon strategy 2000. The Lisbon

strategy 2000 sought to enhance European productivity and competitiveness with the ambitious aim of making Europe into “the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010 capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion and respect for the environment” (SEC, 2010, 114 final). The strategy, undoubtedly an effort towards European integration, was packaged discursively in economic terms emphasizing profit, market and job growth in connection to social cohesion. Thirteen years later, we know that the Lisbon strategy has not succeeded in its original aims (see the European Commission evaluation report SEC, 2010, 114 final), and Claudio Radaelli, in the foreword to Copeland and Papadimitriou’s (2012) book-length study on the topic, may be right when he writes: “Perhaps Lisbon will be read in the future as an example of collective learning, a sort of negative lesson about how NOT to define and promote integration”.

As far as languages were concerned, the Lisbon strategy sparked a number of applied linguistic studies that set out to investigate interconnections between economic and linguistic performance. These studies particularly targeted SMEs (small- and medium-sized enterprises), the principal business entity in the European Union. One much-cited study commissioned by the European Union, which was carried out by the UK National Centre for Languages in 2006, was entitled “Effects on the European Economy of Shortages of Foreign Language Skills in Enterprise (ELAN)”. ELAN’s objective was to “provide the Commission and decision-takers in Member States with practical information and analysis of the use of language skills by SMEs and the impact on business performance” (HAGEN *et al.*, 2006). Prior to ELAN, a number of studies on the language usage of SMEs had been undertaken in Europe, notably REFLECT, ELISE, and ELUCIDATE. These earlier studies outlined typical problematic constellations encountered in international trade and drew attention to the language resources and strategies employed by the companies surveyed. Similar studies had also been carried out with respect to larger, global, companies, notably TALKING SENSE, which analysed companies’ language policies and implementation along the dimensions language preparedness, responsiveness, awareness, and management.

While previous studies looked at the “linkage between language skills, cultural competence and exporting performance” (HAGEN *et al.*, 2006:4), ELAN specifically tried to calculate the economic loss (in currency) that the European economy suffered

on account of language problems or cultural barriers and formulated requirements for furthering language skills in SMEs. The approach taken by ELAN, and previous studies, has continued to the present day. This is seen in the more recent PIMLICO study, again carried out by Hagen *et al.* (2011). The PIMLICO study forms the scientific backdrop to the recent European communication initiative “Languages mean business”, which seeks “to promote the exemplar practice and application of language management strategies amongst European businesses” (HAGEN *et al.*, 2011:2). The initiative shows concrete efforts to feed back knowledge gained from applied linguistic studies to enterprises in the form of guides and systems that support SMEs in Europe. Other recent studies conducted at European level can be interpreted in the light of the abovementioned research activities (e.g. RINSCHÉ; PORTERA-ZANOTTI 2009, who calculated the estimated size and value of the language industry in Europe; DAVIGNON *et al.*, 2008, on the contribution of languages to competitiveness; or the study by the Bureau van Dijk Information Management in 2011).

The economic focus outlined in these various research studies and activities echo a trend seen elsewhere in applied linguistics focusing on the interaction between language and economic variables. In its most consequent form it reminds us of the work done by Swiss economist François Grin (see e.g. GRIN, 2002; 2006; GRIN *et al.*, 2010). Similar trends can also be seen in applied linguistic research projects funded by the European Union. In this context, two larger (applied) linguistic research projects spring to mind: DYLAN (Dynamique des langues et gestion de la diversité, 2006-2011) and LINEE (Languages in a Network of European Excellence, 2006-2010). Both research projects investigated the interrelationships between language use, diversity, internationalization and economy, and both DYLAN and LINEE included economy as a key variable in the study of linguistic diversity (on DYLAN see e.g. BERTHOUD *et al.*, 2010; on LINEE see STUDER; WERLEN, 2012). Although more funding effort in recent years has gone into emphasizing the area of translation (dubbing, subtitling, quality of translation) and, in particular, the language industry itself, the question of language policy and planning in multilingual business environments undoubtedly remains a key research area for many more years to come.

Thus, from the perspective of applied linguistic research in business contexts, the most important area of study in the coming years lies in studying the interrelations between multilingualism, intercultural communication, and

communicative efficiency in important trade languages (*linguae francae*, notably English). I would like, in conclusion to my response to your first question, comment on these directions briefly. While part of the research will be concerned with the economics of language, that is, with economic considerations of language use, much work still needs to be done in understanding how social actors negotiate meaning in culturally diverse social contexts. Much future research will therefore be devoted to the close, almost ethnographic, study of local communities of practice and their pragmatic solutions to language issues they encounter. This orientation to socially situated contexts emphasizes what Grabe (2010:35) refers to as the increasing “importance of needs analysis and variable solutions in differing local contexts” – both from an ‘applied’ perspective (applicability of study findings to a particular ‘field’) but also from a theory-building perspective in applied linguistics. This orientation also draws attention to Grabe’s (2010:44) call for attention to motivation, attitude and affect of social actors involved in devising, implementing and ‘taking up’ language strategies (i.e. planners and ‘users’ of strategies). The consideration of actors’ perceptions further involves questions of how social actors make sense of, and reconcile, often contradictory discourses and ideologies concerning language use at the workplace (STUDER *et al.*, 2010; STUDER, 2012). It is not least the social actors’ perceptions that guide their readiness, responsiveness to, and, ultimately, their ability to learn to use a lingua franca (e.g. BELF, Business English as a Lingua Franca, e.g. KANKAANRANTA; PLANKEN, 2010, GERRITSEN; NICKERSON, 2009). Language perceptions also represent a site of struggle for underlying social tensions and inequalities, which can be brought to light applying the critical discursive perspective (PENNYCOOK, 2001; STUDER, 2013). It will be a continuous theoretical and practical challenge for applied linguists to understand more fully the interplay between language strategy, local adaptations, actual language performance and actors’ perceptions.

In response to your question about linguistics applied to business contexts being a field of its own, I definitely agree with the expression ‘field’ as applied linguistics concretely deals with real-world contexts and issues. I would, however, be reluctant to call it a linguistic discipline in its own right (since I believe there already is a strong tendency to compartmentalize linguistics into too many sub-fields). I see it as a strong and well-established research orientation within applied linguistics that has developed from a real-world need for efficiency in communication. I appreciate

that linguistic studies in this area partly use their own theoretical foundations and rely on specialized investigative traditions. The principled study of the interrelationship between language and business, especially when taking into account the situated nature of language in use, will fascinate and occupy applied linguists in Europe and beyond for many more years to come.

**ReVEL – What are the major difficulties that a linguist faces when he or she decides to work with or in a business organization?**

**Patrick Studer** – Difficulties are manifold when working as linguists with real-world study objects. Firstly, researchers need to take into account the specificity of the business culture. The business culture does not permit any unaccounted use of time; time is directly translated in terms of financial effort on the part of the company and is related, one way or another, to productivity and performance. This means that the research cooperation offered by an enterprise is treated as an investment that ultimately needs to pay off financially. More efficient communication and better language skills certainly contribute to performance and productivity through employee satisfaction, better management, or an improved relationship with customers. The fundamental challenge of applied linguistic studies in business contexts, however, lies in the difficulty to measure, in economic terms, the exact contribution of language to these processes. Here, the linguist may find the business environment not very open towards linguistics and may be confronted with questions about the use of applied linguistic research in the business world in general. Moreover, linguists who work in business environments move on interdisciplinary territory in which applied linguistic concerns, other than (foreign) language training courses, are often subsumed by organizational units within the enterprise (e.g. by Communication Departments, Human Resources).

Generally, slow feedback (process) organizational cultures are more open and willing to cooperate than fast reward cultures (on the distinction see DEAN; KENNEDY, 2000). Slow feedback cultures are often larger organizations that have the resources and means to develop their staff long-term and sustainably. Faster reward cultures are typically found in small- and medium-sized enterprises. As a result, applied linguistic research carried out to date has tended to focus on larger enterprises. This is unfortunate since findings from larger enterprises do not seem to

be immediately applicable to smaller business structures. This is unfortunate also because smaller businesses have repeatedly reported financial losses on account of a lack of language and communication skills.

When setting out to work with enterprises, linguists may first want to map out the organizational territory they are venturing into. Studies on organizational culture, such as the work by Edgar Schein (e.g. 2010:13-16), may help better understand the organization one plans to work with. Important cultural parameters one should look for in businesses include power asymmetries, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, or long versus short-term orientation (HOFSTEDÉ, 1980; 1991). A brief analysis of the organization helps decide on the best modalities in developing and maintaining contacts with the enterprises.

In your question, you ask about the difficulties that arise when a linguist decides to work with an enterprise. I think this question is put the wrong way around – in fact, it is a best-case scenario when the decision about collaboration rests with the linguists; more often, the challenges lie in the unawareness of businesses of the existence of linguists and their potential benefit to business organizations. Linguists are often forced to make the first move by contacting companies proactively and trying to convince them of the value of a particular research idea or undertaking.

In Switzerland, for example, there are government-supported funding instruments that institutionalize the collaboration between a research institution and a private business (Commission for Technology and Innovation – CTI). Projects run in the framework of this scheme require that private businesses contribute a substantial amount of money and/or time to the project. In CTI projects, a research institution, typically a school of higher education, develops innovation based on problems identified by industry. Both sides of the innovation process share costs and effort, while the research side is funded by CTI. It may be the case that enterprises directly approach research institutions with a particular research idea in mind. Often, however, the idea develops the other way around. While finding enterprises willing to collaborate on linguistic projects is not impossible, it is much more difficult than finding enterprises interested in technological innovation. Linguists, therefore, have to be prepared to meet resistance on all sides (also on the side of the funding body itself), if they wish to successfully carry out research with the help of private industry.

**ReVEL – What would be the ideal conditions that a graduate program in Linguistics should meet in order to become ‘visible’ to business organizations?**

**Patrick Studer** – There is a philosophical point included in your question about the conditions of graduate programs in linguistics. You seem to imply that it is desirable for all linguists to be perceived by business organizations and that programs in applied linguistics should be oriented to ‘please’ the business agenda. I am not sure that this should be the primary aim of an applied linguistics program in higher education. Linguists traditionally occupy a number of professional domains in the public or private education sector (public schools, private language schools), and have a solid footing in the language, media and publishing industries. So first and foremost, linguists train for one of the above areas of work, if the professional training is a strong element within the degree program at all. Business enterprises are a field of application for linguists much like the health industry or the educational sector. Of course there are always linguists who want to be active in the private business industry, and for those individuals there are programs in place that are aimed at preparing them for later work in business contexts.

So I understand your question about visibility as a question about the quality of the business-oriented undergraduate and graduate degree programs that are already in place across Europe. The quality of a program can be measured in terms of professional success students achieve following graduation and one way of finding out about success or failure of a program is to track alumni career paths. Let me take my school as a case in point. Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) runs an undergraduate and graduate program within the department of media studies called ‘organizational communication’. Within this program, students are prepared for later work in communication of private and public enterprises. In a longitudinal study (PERRIN, 2010), the department of media studies found out that within the ten years of the program’s existence, 94% of graduates from the BA program had found work in the field of their studies (PR agencies, communication departments in public institutions, private enterprises, associations, and not-for-profit organizations). The success of the undergraduate program (and of the graduate program) relies on a number of factors that build on the close connections between academic studies and the professional world:

- 1) Content: the content taught matches to a large extent the professional requirements the graduates later meet in their jobs;
- 2) Personality: prospective students have to successfully pass a personality entry test; the tested elements – analytical skills, competence in dealing with criticism, empathy, self-esteem, curiosity and team-orientation – have been corroborated by the former students as key to success in the business world;
- 3) ‘Hybrid’ nature of the program: the program is structured in a way as to train students for work both as journalists and as communication specialists in the private industry.

Many former students in the survey rated their competitiveness on the market as high and indicated that they were working in fields that they had always wanted to.

At master’s degree level, the department has been running the program *Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) in Communication Management and Leadership* since 2006. Very recently, the department’s consecutive master’s program has been approved and will be running as of 2014. The success of the MAS program, more specifically than the BA, relies on its close connections with the working world. The program has been designed to attract students with considerable work experience (9 years in average). This professional focus sets the program apart from consecutive master programs which follow undergraduate studies immediately.

The advantage of a professionally-oriented master’s program is obvious: it gives students a solid academic basis for moving up the career ladder into more senior positions. In the survey, a significant number of graduates subsequently were offered better jobs and higher salaries. As with the BA-program, students indicated in the survey that they had benefited in particular from the theoretical perspective on real-world and on-the-job problems. The modular structure of the program helped students pursue their studies flexibly. Finally, from an employer’s perspective, the program can be seen as successful as it is often (part-)financed by companies who wish to specialize their employees. From the perspective of the company, therefore, financing a master’s program is one powerful way of retaining its employees in the longer term.

Programs such as the MAS at ZHAW exist in many places in Europe. As the example of ZHAW shows, the ‘ideal’ conditions of (under-) graduate programs that wish to be seen by businesses are as follows: Firstly, the programs must have very

close connections to the industries it 'serves'. Secondly, programs must be perceived by companies and its employees as offering specialized knowledge and professional training on real-world issues that are needed to advance on the market. A MAS program may initially seem more suited to address the professional requirements as it recruits its students directly from industry itself. A consecutive program must be structured in a way as to allow for considerable exchange with the professional world (in terms of field practice) so that students get in touch with prospective employers early on. And, finally, the selection of students should be guided by personality tests measuring the suitability of candidates for the program.

**ReVEL – When the linguist decides to explore business contexts, does he or she need a new attitude, say, differently than that expected in the academic environment?**

**Patrick Studer** – No, I do not think so. If we pay attention to the specificity of the field as previously outlined, we are well prepared to deal with the business audience. Linguists need to be aware at all times that they work on foreign disciplinary ground with different rules but this is something linguists are generally trained to do as they have learned to decode communicative behavior and to adapt communicatively to the communities they set out to study. Also linguists wishing to study business contexts will be aware that research projects are often collaborative efforts to which researchers from various areas of expertise contribute. Linguistically-oriented research into business contexts is often carried out together with organizational psychologists, social psychologists, and economists themselves. The interdisciplinary set-up guarantees a balanced approach to the problem that takes into account different perspectives on the subject matter. If you show little willingness or ability to adopt concepts and terminology used by disciplines closer to economics than linguistics than you may be met with criticism. But this applies to all contexts linguist study in the real world.

**ReVEL – Could you suggest some bibliographical references on the topic, for our readers?**

**Patrick Studer** – I would generally recommend reading one of the many existing introductions to business communication and linguistics. I would probably start with the *Handbook of Business Discourse*, edited by Francesca Bargiela-Chiappini (2009) which provides a first overview of the field. There are many specialized publications available that emphasize specific interests business linguists might want to pursue. The inter- and crosscultural dimension is strongly represented in the literature. If one wishes to focus on cultural aspects of business communication, I would read books aimed at graduates such as Gibson (2002) or Chaney and Martin (2013). There is also an interesting article by Varner (2000) which discusses the theoretical foundation of intercultural business communication. There are book series, such as the one by Michael B. Hinner, which might be of interest to prospective researchers (first volume edited in 2005). But any library or internet search with the strings ‘intercultural communication’ and ‘business’ will bring up a number of publications prospective researchers or students may want to consult when studying cultural aspects of business communication.

If one wishes to tackle the theoretical and methodological challenges of applied linguistics in business contexts in the foreseeable future, I find studies useful that emphasize the situated, conversation-analytic perspective of interaction at the workplace. These include, for example, publications in the area of institutional conversation analysis by John Drew and John Heritage (first edition 1992). More recent publications in this school of thought include Heritage’s (2004) chapter on *Conversation analysis and institutional talk* and Heritage and Steven Clayman’s (2010) volume entitled *Talk in Action. Interactions, Identities, and Institutions*. The edited volume by McHoul and Rapley (2001) might be cited in this context as they add, among other things, a socio-psychological angle to linguistics in business settings (discourse analysis and discursive psychology). From German-speaking linguistics, one might further adduce insight from the school of functional pragmatics surrounding Konrad Ehlich and Jochen Rehbein (cf. EHLICH, 1998, for a critical discussion with regard to the business context see STUDER; HOHENSTEIN, 2011).

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