The notion of “experts” in late modern media

Panel at the 13th International Pragmatics Conference, New Delhi, 8-13 September 2013

Panel organizers: Jacob Thøgersen & Jan-Ola Östman

Panel discussant: Jef Verschueren

“Late modernity” (covering, roughly, the last forty years) is characterized by processes of democratization, globalization and conversationalization in society, and diversity and speed of communication are key concepts. New media make true global interactions possible: an individual can report his or her first-hand experiences to the world, literally as they unfold. At the same time, “old” media like TV, radio and newspapers play an important role in legitimizing stories that are reported through the new media.

These changes in the quantity and speed of global communication have important consequences for the quality of global communication: (a) Stories produced in one setting are also read in other settings. The legitimacy and authority of the communicator is always up for challenge, they are negotiable and negotiated. (b) The proportion of “noise” to significant content increases. More and more content is produced, but not all of it is of equal significance and reliability. Additionally, more and more content is a relatively crude recycling (cut-and-paste) of information produced by others. The recycling and re-appropriation of information adds new meaning potentials, and notions of intertextuality and the use of multiple voices in mediated reports become relevant. As more and more information is produced, issues of authority and credibility become ever more pertinent.

This panel focuses on the changing character of the media and in particular on the role of experts and authorities. Traditionally, the media has been one of the main sources on the basis of which people have formed their worldview. But is there a place for experts in late modernity, or have authority taken on a new form? Experts have of tradition (in the old media) been selected for interviews among well-educated or high-profiled actors in society. Today, an established “expert’s” statement is not left uncontested, but the (wo)man in the street is asked for a down-to-earth opinion, and such opinions are taken to be just as valid as the pronounced expert’s: it is the voice of the street, the voice of everyday experience, and thus an unbiased voice. At the same time we see (self-proclaimed) media experts emerging. These may be authors or commentators on current affairs, who are always ready to share their opinion on every issue when presented with a microphone, or they may be authorities emerging from the new media as central figures in their community of practice.

The authority of the big media houses, newspapers, and radio- and TV-stations are thus being reworked. While media houses earlier had authority because they had sole access to information on events, they are no longer in this privileged position. They often have no more access to information than everybody else. How, then, do media houses establish their authority as somehow exceptional? Here, notions of intertextuality and the use of multiple voices in mediated reports are particularly relevant. How do media houses borrow authority from authentic sources “on the ground”, and how do they themselves lend authority to these reports so they become established facts? And how is the voice of “the original” – if there is such a thing as authenticity – preserved and utilized in the media representation.

The question can equally be asked of re-appropriation within the new media: How are other actors’ stories being used, cited, discussed, and discredited in the global communication stream? And how do the “new” media borrow authority from and lend authority to “old” media.

The panel thus also looks into the various actors and sources for mediated information (including issues of stylization, imitation, salience and enregisterment). Multilingualism, and especially the use and abuse, representation and misrepresentation of different varieties (dialects, languages) in the media will be a natural aspect of these issues, as will appropriation.

The panel’s attention to the seeming dispersion of expertise invites papers that approach the issue from different perspectives: (1) the media themselves acting as expert (cf. news agencies, media centers); (2) the changing role of traditional experts in the media; (3) the praxis of self-selecting oneself as expert in the social media; (4) mediated experts, where the media construes actors (e.g. tweeters) as experts (i.e. give them credibility) by quoting them and distributing their texts; and (5) recycling and reappropriation in general: re-transmitting other people’s messages e.g. through “likes”, “re-tweets” or by using “social” media sources in “old” media etc.

We also want to invite papers that deal with the role of late modern media in relation to language standards and norms, and by implication, with who has the role of being an “expert” on language use. The media are presumed to keep up a “good standard” language and are challenged if they do not. But what is the status and ideology of standards in late modern society? Here, we welcome both experimental, sociolinguistic attitude studies, and studies on discourse, incl. studies on metadiscourse.