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Book review of Digital Business Discourse

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Reseñas/Book Reviews



Digital Business Discourse.

Erika Darics (ed).

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 274 pages. ISBN: 978-1-137-40556-2.

Congratulations to Erika Darics for editing such an exciting volume on digital business discourse (DBD)! The volume showcases a truly interdisciplinary scholar at the crossroads of applied linguistics, business communication and computer-mediated discourse analysis. She has been able to identify fellow scholars that make a difference in this multidisciplinary field and been able to combine their contributions to create a rewarding reading experience overall. Well done!

Writing a review on a book like this is a daunting task: there's so much I'd like to say and so little room to say it. So, first things first: Anybody interested in digitalization, business, or discourse should read the book! Wearing the three hats myself – D for an interest in email genres, B for working in a business school and another D for a desire to learn more about discourse and language – certainly makes me biased. However, since the three are so tightly intertwined in today's business life, there really isn't one without the other, or the third. Although each of the twelve chapters would deserve a review of its own, I rather explain more about a few of them than less about each.

The volume opens with an "Introduction", and is then divided into three parts: (1) "New technologies: New modes of communication", (2) "New modes of communication: new conventions" and (3) "Theoretical and methodological approaches to DBD". In her introduction, Darics delivers on her promise: "Fresh Perspectives"! How she unfolds the process of finalizing the title of the book alone allures the reader forward to find out how language works in digitally mediated professional communication. With the help of her competent crew of authors representing various research streams (e.g. corporate communication, rhetoric, organizational behavior,

media, innovation, business discourse, pragmatics) in a diverse set of disciplines (e.g. linguistics, applied linguistics, communication) she sets forth to give the readers an overview of the most recent research that addresses “emerging communication practices in digitally mediated professional genres” (page 3).

The first part of the book, “New technologies: New modes of communication”, focuses on both emerging and “old” but not yet conventionalized online genres such as consumer review websites (Camilla Vásquez), CEO tweets (Katerina Girginova), instant messaging (Kris M. Markman) and business email (Nives Lenassi). What I found particularly engaging was Girginova’s discussion on the role of CEOs’ personal tweeting practices in the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO). The analysis of the 2,086 tweets demonstrated, for instance, evidence for McPhee & Zuag’s (2009) four constituting flows of membership negotiation, self-structuring, institutional positioning, and activity coordination. Interestingly, however, the majority of the tweets (63%) could not be categorized into any of the flows. Girginova argues that the dominance of this “non-flow” category of content sharing is potentially indicative of “different organizational realities where constitution occurs through social interactions that are less structured around and physically bound to an organization” (page 49). She posits that amending the four-flow framework – and adding content sharing – would better reflect the communicative landscape of modern organizations.

“New modes of communication: New conventions” addresses how the new technologies affect communication conventions. Chapter 5 by Karianne Skovholt is on doing leadership in a virtual team, Bernie Chun Nam Mak and Carmen Lee focus on swearing in computer-mediated workplace discourse, Kristy Beers Fägersten on conflicting employee and corporate interests on intranet and Valerie Creelman on negotiating customer dissatisfaction in blogosphere. As an email researcher myself, I particularly enjoyed Skovholt’s discussion of leadership as a discursive construct. Through a detailed analysis of the discourse of some 700 emails collected from a Norwegian virtual team, she is able to demonstrate how the leader of the team uses language to contribute to the building of trust, promotion of in-group solidarity and the positioning of the leader vis-à-vis subordinates. Similarly, to the other authors, Skovholt provides plenty of examples from her authentic data, which illustrates the points in an exemplary manner. Also, Creelman’s account of a crisis communication case and the rhetorical

analysis of both the original image restoration post as well as customer responses is able to capture the dynamic and dialogic nature of communication. And as she claims on page 183: “in ways that Bakhtin, in developing his social theory of language, perhaps had not fully imagined.”

“Theoretical and methodological approaches to digital business discourse” as the final part of the volume leads us to the future research agendas. Some of these chapters can be described as outright far-reaching in introducing new smart methodologies (the deanex method by Erika Darics; adaptation of communicology by Craig T. Maier and David Deluliis) and new concepts (e.g. digital emotional literacy by Steven A. Edelson, Philip Kim, Ron Scott, and Julie M. Szendrey), while others apply more established methodologies (rhetorical moves of emails by María Luisa Carrió-Pastor). Taking a closer look at Chapter 10, Maier and Deluliis provocatively propose a new definition for DBD. They argue that DBD should be viewed “*as the embodied experience of using technology to communicate within organizations*” (page 209, original italics), i.e. as a “*human practice*” instead of simply as a technological process of using language. In their view, DBD researchers should find ways to investigate our feelings and thoughts when we are using communication technologies, e.g. smart phones. In DBD research, the questions of what we do and why we do it with our devices is not only relevant but also inspiring. They present a fascinating account of incorporating Lanigan’s (1992) *Communicology* approach to investigate digital business discourse and develop methodologies on how the practice of this research could look like. Exciting avenue for research with a number of prospective practical implications!

Although the study focusing on the identification of rhetorical moves in emails written by Indian non-native-speaker English professionals showed differences in comparison to Bhatia’s (1993) move structure in traditional letters written by native English speakers, it would have been interesting to hear more about the implications for non-native business professionals. As we know, digitalization and globalization go hand in hand changing the business environment in profound ways, and the language/resource used in digital business interactions and discourse is (increasingly) English (or rather English as Business Lingua Franca, BELF; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013). In view of this, maybe my only critical comment about the volume relates to this aspect of DBD. It would have been rewarding to have some more input from the perspective of the use of BELF by speakers of different linguistic backgrounds in various digitalized business environments.

To sum up, *Digital Business Discourse* edited by Erika Darics makes a strong case for discourse-focused research in the digitalized business environment. It creates a kaleidoscopic view of the phenomenon of practitioners working – and communicating – in today’s digitalized workplace. And most importantly: it offers inspiring new research directions for scholars as well as insights and ideas for teachers in business, professional, corporate and organizational communication. In its non-digitalized format, it would be best enjoyed in peace and quiet with your mobile turned off. Enjoy!

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