

## TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK FOR BUSINESS DISCOURSE: MOVING BEYOND DISCIPLINARY DIVIDES

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### ABSTRACT

For a long time, business communication research has oscillated between competing priorities: professional training and theoretical rigor, quantitative and qualitative methods, and North American and European epistemological traditions. This conceptual article revisits the seminal argument made by Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson (2002) in their seminal opinion piece, *Business Discourse: Old Arguments, New Horizons*. He argues that the proposed shift from "business communication" to "business speech" represents more than a semantic shift, but a fundamental reorientation toward language as a social act. Drawing on their integrated multi-level analytical framework (macro, meso, micro), this article makes three contributions. First, it synthesizes the "old debates" around disciplinary identity, borders and methodological pluralism. Second, it introduces the concept of collaborative research as a practical solution to interdisciplinary research challenges. Third, we demonstrate the applicability of the concept in four empirical domains. Importantly, this article also provides a unique perspective on the limitations of this framework in the era of artificial intelligence-mediated communication, the unresolved tensions between power and speech in business environments, and the need to expand partnership research to include non-managerial and non-Western voices. The article concludes that while Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson's vision remains incredibly visionary, it needs to be updated to reflect the digital, postcolonial, and algorithmic realities of 21st century work.

**Keywords:** Business discourse; business communication; partnership research; multimethod research; organizational communication; genre analysis; AI-mediated communication.

### INTRODUCTION

#### A Field in Search of Identity

What is business communication? Is it a practical science aimed at improving workplace efficiency, a branch of applied linguistics focused on text and talk, or a subfield of organizational studies concerned with power and culture? For much of the 1990s, these questions dominated conferences and journal special issues, often producing more heat than light. In their landmark 2002 article, Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson diagnosed this "search for identity" not as a weakness to be resolved through a single definition, but as a productive tension to be managed through a new lens: business discourse.

Having worked across academic and corporate settings, I find that this tension has not been resolved in the intervening decades—nor should it be. What Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson understood, and what many subsequent critics have missed, is that productive tension is the engine of interdisciplinary insight. The moment a field claims a fixed identity, it becomes a

gatekeeping mechanism rather than a living intellectual community. Their "business discourse" framework succeeds precisely because it remains porous.

This article revisits their argument. I begin by reconstructing the core debates they identified. I then present their analytical framework. Next, I show how four empirical studies demonstrate the framework's utility. Finally, I offer three original critiques and extensions: (1) the framework's blind spot regarding digital and AI-mediated communication; (2) the under-theorization of power, particularly along lines of race, class, and global hierarchy; and (3) a proposal for expanding partnership research beyond academia-industry collaboration to include community-based and participatory models.

## **2. Old Debates: Terminology, Boundaries and Methods**

### **2.1 The Question of Label**

One of the ongoing discussions concerned terminology. In North America, "business communication" had strong professional roots, often contrasted with "managerial communication" and "organizational communication" (Reinsch, 1996; Shelby, 1996). European researchers, on the other hand, were less concerned with border protection and more interested in the utilitarian goal of "developing and disseminating knowledge that improves the efficiency and effectiveness of business operations" (Louhiala-Salminen, 1999, p. 26).

Bargela-Chiappini and Nickerson suggest reorganization. Business communication becomes a global category that includes organizational, managerial, and argumentative approaches. Their key approach is to elevate commercial discourse as a programmatic label denoting a commitment to epistemological and methodological exchange between discursive disciplines. I think this reconstruction is elegant but incomplete. By subsuming "business communication" and making "business speech" a specific approach, they risk reproducing the very hierarchies they seek to destroy. In reality, many university corporate communication programs are still tied to business school pragmatism, and discourse analysis thrives in linguistics and communication departments. The two rarely speak. A more radical approach is to abandon disciplinary labels altogether and organize research around problems (e.g., "How do global teams coordinate across time zones and languages?") rather than methodology or departmental identity.

### **2.2 Disciplinary limitations**

Border fears were particularly acute in the United States. Critics have emphasized the "traditional emphasis on writing" and "borrowing from many disciplines" (Rivers, 1994). Some argue for equal status between the subfields. Others lament the failure of interdisciplinary approaches to constructing a coherent identity (Baker Graham & Thralls, 1998). Europe's reaction was less defensive. Instead of clamping down on borders, Bargela-Chiappini and Nickerson called for gradual integration of sectors. I agree with the spirit, but I question the rhythm. Twenty years later, disciplinary divisions still exist in university recruitment, journal peer review processes, funding committees, and more. A linguist cites organization theory and is praised for its "interdisciplinarity." Organizational theorists who engage in detailed discourse analysis are still sometimes considered "methodologically soft." This asymmetry is important. True fusion requires systemic change. These include joint

doctoral programs, integrated faculty positions, and evaluation committees that reward rather than penalize risk-taking. The authors acknowledge the practical obstacles but perhaps underestimate how deeply embedded disciplinary identities are.

### 2.3 Methodological pluralism

Early research on business communication relied heavily on quantitative approaches. Yet, these have proven insufficient to capture situated and context-sensitive interaction. Murphy (1998) and others have advocated more qualitative approaches. Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson support a multimethod approach, but go further and suggest partnership research, or collaborative research across related fields.

Partnership research sounds great, but who will pay for it? My observation is that younger scientists, especially those at non-Western or non-elite institutions, are expected to be "interdisciplinary," while senior scientists in positions of authority can afford to remain experts. Additionally, corporate partnerships come with constraints such as nondisclosure agreements, limited access to data, and pressure to produce actionable (i.e., management-friendly) rather than material results. I'm not against partnership research. I advocate political and economic transparency. Although the authors mention "well-known obstacles and limitations," they do not identify power asymmetry as a major problem.

### 3. New Horizons: A unified analytical framework

Central to their proposal is a three-level analytical framework.

Macro level - national and regional cultures that shape common discourses. Meso level – organizational culture(s), type of business, control methods.

Micro level – individual socio-psychological profiles and pragmalinguistic characteristics in typical actions or textualizations.

The framework also includes language systems (multilingual workplaces) and codes (technical jargon). The three levels are "expandable interplaying factors" rather than static boxes.

This framework is a genuine achievement. Unlike many communication models that are either too abstract (e.g., "everything is connected to everything") or too rigid (e.g., linear sender-receiver diagrams), it offers usable analytical handles while resisting reductionism. I have repeatedly found the macro-meso-micro distinction useful in teaching and research design. It anticipates a future negotiation, and is archived for years. My opinion: The authors nod to intertextuality and interdiscursivity but do not fully incorporate longitudinal dimensions. A meeting in week 3 reshapes the discourse possibilities in week 10. I would add a temporal axis or treat "textualizations" as events in a narrative sequence, not just static products.

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