

GURT 2000 closing panel discussion, May 6, 2000

Participants include conference chairs, plenary speakers, and audience members

Heidi Hamilton:

To start off our discussion this afternoon, I'd like to say a few words to lay out how I see the kind of endeavor that we're engaged in as we work across disciplines. Sometimes people stumble into medical discourse or into discourse of the law, education, technology, business, or media because of some interest in linguistics, in language. They're not necessarily interested in the other discipline; they just happen to be working on some linguistic feature or discourse strategy and they want to find various contexts in which to look at it. So, for example, they could be very interested in questions and want to look at how questions are used institutionally as opposed to in everyday conversation. It doesn't mean that they want to go out and change the world.

On the other hand, there are linguists who have a very strong commitment to societal change or at least to addressing what they see as being not quite right with the way things are. And then everything in between. And I think if we choose to look at change and addressing societal issues, then we run directly into many of the problems that we've seen already in this conference. Work across paradigms or work in different paradigms can present us with stumbling blocks. We may be excellent linguists and think that we have come up with an insightful analysis of a problem within another discipline and then simply not find anyone in that discipline who wants to hear about it. Perhaps they just don't buy the evidence we're presenting or they don't understand our qualitative research methodologies.

So as we're coming together now to close this conference, I want to outline a couple of issues that I think we need to attend to. When you get involved in a project doing linguistics in another profession, what is your role? Who initiates the project? Sometimes it's the professional coming to you, seeking you out for help. Other times, you might come up with an idea and try to gain access to the profession. What's your role as linguist? Is it simply providing a different perspective, are you engaged as a consultant in a fairly systematic way, or are you actually a full collaborator? How much time are you going to spend on the project? Is it something that you're doing along with ten other projects or is it something that you're devoting your entire time to? Are you doing it

Content made available by
Georgetown University Press,
Digital Georgetown, and
the Department of Languages and Linguistics.

by yourself or are you working with a team? Once you have become involved, how do you develop the research question and design the project across disciplines? Do you set up the design so that it'll work effectively from both perspectives, being respectful of each other's territory and highlighting the assumptions from each discipline? Or are you designing it from your perspective and then trying to be convincing to the other discipline that that's the right way to go? Once you get the project designed, you need to carry out the work. However this is done—through observing or interviewing, taping—depending on the discipline, you'll have to deal with human subjects committees and cross-disciplinary compromises, such as quantitative/qualitative and experimental/natural issues. Then once you get the data, you have to make sense of it in some way, working with analytical units and frameworks that might be attached to one type of paradigm rather than another. What counts as evidence? And then reporting these findings—how are they reported, to what audience? We can obviously report our findings in our own journals to each other. We can also try to report them in the disciplines we are working with through their professional journals. We can also report them, as some of us have been able to do, to the general public and actually get beyond the professions to a point where society can see that what we are doing is important.

So these are some of the aspects we can be thinking about as we try to draw conclusions about what we've learned in this conference. If we think back to the papers that we've listened to, I think we'll see that each person has answered these questions in slightly different ways. So with that said, let's open up to any questions or comments from the audience for any of the panelists. It can be something directed to everyone or to specific individuals on the panel.

John Rickford:

One of the things that really struck me while going from session to session was the sense of the vital importance of the issues at hand—whether it be education, journalism, law, medicine—the sense that people's lives or deaths or people's futures or non-futures were hanging in the balance. We saw that very critically in a number of papers. It's a very invigorating feeling, because sometimes of course in doing linguistics and teaching linguistics you ask yourself (or students ask), "What is this good for? What's the point of all this? I know I enjoy it, but what's it good for?" I have the sense that many of the people who are here have answered that question, or are starting to ask that question, are starting to work toward a good answer to that question. So you can come away with a kind of spring in your step, or a sense of meaning and significance in your lives.

Content made available by
Georgetown University Press,
Digital Georgetown, and
the Department of Languages and Linguistics.

One of the things that struck me about that is how often that sense of the potential applicability is absent even within sociolinguistic texts. Ralph Fasold's book, a two-volume introduction to sociolinguistics, is one of a few to devote a substantial part to the application of sociolinguistics, so even within sociolinguistics, that gets short shrift. And then within introductory texts on linguistics, the topic gets nothing at all. For the vast hundreds and thousands of students who are introduced to our discipline every year, there is no sense that there's any kind of potential application of linguistics to real-world issues. For instance, I know that in my part of the country in California, in Silicon Valley, applied linguistics sometimes just means working with high-tech companies to see how you can help them with their enterprises. There are practical applications of various kinds, but you're a little further away from the life-and-death, future-or-non-future issues that people are grappling with here.

But at the same time that I was struck by that, I was also struck by the need to minimize the danger of having us drift from core areas of linguistics. People were of course drawing on discourse analysis, but sometimes they were trying to draw also very specifically on phonetics and phonology and syntax. And I had this little worry within myself that we can become so absorbed with the applications that we don't often master the tools to be able to do a good analysis. Even in the area of language and education, the one that I was dealing with, I have heard enough people look at data from classrooms and so on and come out with analyses that are absolutely wrong. Or I have heard them talking to teachers, I mean even at the level of calling a pronoun a "preposition," or whatever it may be, and repeat this several times. So as we rush to the application of our tools, I think it behooves us and it behooves us in teaching our students to make sure they do have enough tools to build the building or to put the cart together, whatever it might be.

I was also struck by the importance of the point [Heidi Hamilton] already made of being able to speak to the different kinds of audiences that we address, which takes a remarkable code-switching ability. Obviously, people like Roger Shuy, who has done it in the law cases, have mastered that but I think for others of us, it is not easy trying to speak to the general public. It's not easy trying to speak to a reporter in a way that offers any chance of him or her being able to record accurately what you say.

And the last thing I'd like to say is also the importance of avoiding the demonizing of the institutions with which we work. So you know, the terrible teacher, the awful doctor, the heartless lawyer, whoever it is. I think there are a couple of important points here. One is that—these are very

human and obvious things—but one is that it’s really a hell of a lot easier to see what other people are doing wrong than to be able to see what we ourselves are doing wrong or to be able to correct it. And secondly, I like the point that Richard Frankel was making today that doctors really do want to do better. Teachers really do want to teach better. As we do our analysis and our criticism, we need to retain the sense that with the right way of talking to people and with taking care in our analyses, the people that we are talking about can benefit from and will really want to benefit from the kinds of input we can make. And, of course, there are lots of things that they know that we don’t know, too, that we ourselves can, in all humility, learn. So these are just some quick general points.

Shirley Brice Heath:

I just want to put a footnote on that and something of a caveat, because I think some of the areas of the professions warrant evaluations and warrant some kind of assessment, and language in education is a good example. Courtney Cazden is working on a rewrite of her book on classroom discourse and I talked to her a great deal about that book. One of the points that she has made in our discussions is that so much of the classroom discourse work that’s called educational linguistics or language in education or linguistics in education or whatever, tells you nothing about the learning that is going on. And one of the major difficulties, I think, in working as linguists in professions is that we often don’t feel obligated to undertake serious evaluations of whatever the infusion is that we may have been responsible for. And particularly any kind of assessment that will show what it is that linguistics has done. Roger [Shuy] talked about this years ago when he pointed out that in spite of all the efforts we’ve put as linguists into education, there’s been very little effect in terms of changing basic textbooks. Notions of Standard English or notions of even certain features such as “shall” and “will” and where they sit within questions of correctness, etc., continue. So to that end I wanted to ask [Richard Frankel] a question. Have you had any follow-through from the doctors that have gone through your program, which is obviously so exceptional, five years out, ten years out, fifteen years out, on issues of—the most obvious one would be medical malpractice suits—but on any other indicators that might show that they’re holding the power of the number of hours you give them? And what is your sense of the ability in the medical world to overcome the problem that we’ve not been able to overcome certainly in a number of the other professions with respect to linguistics? Is that making an influence on institutional change in directions that I think we all would agree should be made, if our evaluations hold positive returns?

Richard Frankel:

We have followed up some of the training programs we've done. The best single study of this whole area was done in Great Britain in 1987, and they took first-year medical students and they randomized them to either an experimental or control condition. The experimental group got communication skills training, empathy training, humanistic skills training. They then followed them five years into practice, which was eight to eleven years later depending on what specialty they went into, and there were vast differences between the people who had gotten it in the first year of medical school and what they were doing in practice. They were much more humanistic in their approach. So we know that it can be taught, learned, put into practice; it's not something you're born with or not born with; it's not nature or nurture. When Bill Clinton, I don't know if that's a name that I can say here [laughter], when he was candidate Clinton, he pointed to Rochester as the place where the health care costs were about a third less than they were in the rest of the nation. We've now caught up with the rest of the nation for unrelated reasons. The GAO [Government Accounting Office] actually did a study of Rochester, and one of the conclusions that it came to was that the health care costs were lower in Rochester because Rochester physicians had been taught in this bio-psycho-social model; they knew their patients better and therefore ordered fewer unnecessary tests. I think that there is good evidence that people who practice in this way do a better job.

A third piece of this has to do with physician satisfaction. There are three or four studies that have come out recently where physicians of all types were asked, "What's the most meaningful experience that you've had in providing medical care?" In every single study, 100 percent of the physicians talk about a relationship that was meaningful to them, and none of them talk about technology of medicine. It's all in the relationship. So we know that people who practice medicine in this way are more satisfied. The suicide rate among physicians is four times the national average. The divorce rate is about 70 percent, which is 20 percent above the national average. The rate of alcohol and drug abuse is twice the national average. So we know that physicians don't do so well in terms of their own personal lives, and though this is a bit of speculation, I think people who have learned to balance through their humanity as well as their head actually are at much lower risk as a consequence.

Shirley Brice Heath:

What about the use of these evaluations for institutional change? Your prognosis?

Content made available by
Georgetown University Press,
Digital Georgetown, and
the Department of Languages and Linguistics.

