

BAAL Health and Science Communication SIG Workshop

Computer-mediated health communication: Perspectives from ethnography and discourse analysis

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The recently launched Health and Science Communication (HSC) SIG held its inaugural event on 9 November 2015 at Queen Mary University of London. The workshop attracted interest from researchers at various stages of their careers - from PhD students to established scholars. Competing with a busy programme of Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) festival events taking place all over the country, the workshop attracted 45 participants from the UK and abroad (Australia, Italy, Poland and Sweden). The day was organised around two plenary talks and three presentation sessions: corpus-based approaches to computer mediated communication; ethnographic perspectives; and pragmatics, Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics. These were interspersed with coffee breaks and an informative lunch break during which everyone had the opportunity to relax, network and view posters.

In the first plenary for the day, Elena Semino (Head of Department of the Department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University) presented findings from the ESRC-funded 'Metaphor in end of life care' project. We were reminded that people often use metaphors when speaking about sensitive and complex issues. What is more, different metaphors offer different framings of health and illness and give people different identities with various implications for their wellbeing (e.g. War metaphors, the identity of a fighter and the implications of losing the fight). The talk demonstrated how research on metaphor use and its implications for wellbeing can inform the work of public health practitioners and charities. Innovative methods for the identification and analysis of metaphorical expressions in large data sets were also discussed in this plenary.

The message about the usefulness of social science research was echoed in the second plenary for the day, this time coming from a medical researcher perspective. Julia Bailey (Clinical Senior Lecturer in Primary Care at University College London and Speciality Doctor in Community Sexual Health in Hackney) spoke about the power of social scientists to 'stop medical researchers from doing foolish research'. 'Foolish research' can be avoided by consulting the social science as well as the medical literature on health issues and by accompanying medical trials with qualitative research. This plenary ended with an appeal to social scientists to actively get out the message about the insights that social science research can offer by, for example, volunteering as reviewers for journals like the British Medical Journal.

A lively discussion about the quality of qualitative research followed. Participants raised concerns that the quality of such research may often be a barrier to its wider adoption by medical researchers. The discussion then shifted to reflecting on the challenges faced by social science researchers when working with medical researchers. As some participants remarked, the core challenge often is making contact and getting to work with medical researchers in the first place. Throughout the day the discussion also returned to metaphors in health and illness narratives. Sondos Ibrahim (PhD researcher in Linguistics, Northumbria University) spoke about metaphors in the online discourses of fibromyalgia patients.

Many of the presentations reflected on methods and/or presented novel methods or combinations of methods. Linnea Hanell (PhD researcher at the Department of Swedish Language and Multilingualism, Stockholm University) gave sage advice on ethnographic research involving online

mobile photo/video-sharing and social networking services. Steve Disney (Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader - Language and Linguistics, University of St Mark and St John) and Daniel McDonald (PhD researcher in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, University of Melbourne) both presented innovative uses of corpus methods to analyse online patient forums.

We also heard about: persuasive strategies in computer-mediated vaccine-critical discourse; the construction of the expert patient in infertility blogs, news articles and websites; who writes medical weblogs in Poland and why; accessing medical information online and the case of terminal illness; Quality Interpersonal Communication (QIC) in Ask-the-Expert healthcare websites; medical cannabis illness narratives on social networking sites. As one participant remarked, the day suitably ended with a computer-mediated (video recorded) presentation on informed consent by Annalisa Zanola (Associate Professor at the Department of Economics and Management, University of Brescia), who was unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances.

The key take away from the day was that research based on discourse analysis and/or linguistic ethnography has much to contribute to medical research. The challenge appears to be bridging the gap between the two research communities and the HSC SIG can hopefully serve as one bridging venue. The workshop was actively tweeted using the #healthsci2015 hashtag and a selection of tweets from the day is available at <https://storify.com/dbatanasova/c> . The full workshop programme can be found at <http://www.baal-health.uk/>. To keep up-to-date about future events and to share relevant information with the growing HSC SIG community, join our mailing list: <https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?AO=BAAL-HEALTHSCI>.