Photo: Colourbox

What socio-cognitive linguistics can do for your career guidance practice

As career guidance is a language-based practice, can the discipline of socio-cognitive linguistics add value to our work? In this article I suggest that mutual practitioner-client comprehension can be enhanced by becoming familiar with linguistics theory and research.

Valerie Rowles, RCDP; Career Development Practitioner and Career Development Institute Fellow

Analysing language choices made during interactions between career counsellors and their clients can provide insights that go deeper than surface meaning. What people decide to say is shaped by their individual mental models, their experiences in the world, and their relationship with the person they are speaking with. Linguistics knowledge can be used to discern what is happening for the speaker behind their self-representation during career meetings and generate clues about identity, capacity to navigate relationships for career support, and how clients perceive career concepts. This can be particularly useful in inter-cultural situations where individuals are bringing experiences and values to the discussion formed in discourse communities that are different to those where they now find themselves.

Linking socio-cognitive linguistics and career guidance

Socio-cognitive linguistics considers how cognitive processes and social influences impact on how we express ourselves. It is a broad field of enquiry that can span learning topics from

the most granular, such as words and grammar, to the most expansive, including systemic discourse structures, or normed ideas about what can and cannot be said at societal level.

This discipline is interested in real-life communicative events and is concerned with people's mindful ways of expressing themselves for specific purposes, as well as the cultural background for these events. Such a focus aligns well with career guidance conversations because reflective practitioners often need to uncover meaning at different levels from what their clients say, and they bring awareness of the combination of societal structures and internal psychology on human decision-making. Indeed, the Norwegian Quality Framework for Career Guidance highlights five career competence areas which acknowledge the roles of both external environment and internal aspiration on effective career learning.

Arguably, our guidance practices seek to optimise the career 'health' of our clients so that they can have productive and satisfying work lives. Helping them to know themselves, what they want and what they offer; enabling them to sustain their resilience through building career relationships that support them to make the most of opportunities and to overcome challenges; empowering them to articulate their strengths and motivations to others. I have found three linguistic approaches particularly useful as I reflect on my practice: *politeness theory,* outlined by Penelope Brown and Steven Levinson (1987); *principles of identity construction* from Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005); and *conceptual metaphor theory* explained by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (2003).

Politeness theory

The importance of politeness, assumed to exist in all cultures and societies in some form, is captured by University of California Professor Robin Lakoff's definition: 'a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange' (1990:34). Many studies of politeness start from the notion that in a conversation people seek to avoid being imposed upon or imposing on others, and they look for approval and recognise that others want approval too. British linguistics professor, Geoffrey Leech (2014) explained that this manifests linguistically in how direct or indirect a speaker is and the degree to which they might compliment another person while being self-deprecating themselves. Leech notices a graduating scale of politeness depending on the relative social status of the interlocutors, and whether someone deploys normed conversation principles related to pausing, interrupting, and culturally specific types of response.

I have found considering workplace politeness beneficial when counselling clients who are trying to assimilate into a new setting – for example when their upbringing and previous experience has been in different geographic environments, because there can be misunderstandings that materially affect their career health. For example, in some situations, what anthropological linguist Penelope Brown and social scientist Steven Levinson in their development of politeness theory (1987) call a *bald on record* politeness strategy, where a request or a statement is made without any mitigation as in "give me your CV" rather than "please can you give me your CV*",* would be seen as polite and inoffensive.

In other situations, *off-record strategies*, when the speaker vaguely implies what they want, rather than stating it directly, as in: "I think you have many contacts in the pharmaceutical industry" instead of "can you share your pharmaceutical contacts with me?" would be the politest way of making a request.

Discussing politeness strategies using linguistics terminology has helped me to give objective feedback on how clients form productive relationships in the workplace, because comparisons are made using research-informed measures as opposed to my intuition. Together we can explore communication approaches most likely to engender supportive career mentorship from others.

Four characteristics of politeness that can be used as discussion points with clients:

- Politeness is norm-referenced within societal groupings – what are 'normal' politeness strategies for the group that your client is communicating within?
- Whether behaviour is deemed polite is situational – what different situations is your client dealing with and how could politeness strategies adapt?
- Both politeness and impoliteness can be felt to be desirable – in what circumstances facing your client might impoliteness be acceptable?
- Politeness behaviour can be ritualized in terms of standard responses such as how many times to decline an invitation before finally accepting – which politeness rituals govern your client's situation?

(Adapted from Leech, 2014)

Principles of identity construction

In keeping with the theory of identity as something that people 'do' rather than something they 'are' or 'have' that emerged along with social constructionism in the twentieth century, it makes sense that we use language to assemble parts of our identities. American socio-cultural linguists Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall's 2005 proposition of five principles of identity construction is useful for understanding how identity is managed through interaction, making it especially relevant to career guidance practice.

I have sometimes turned to the third principle, *indexicality*, because this is about the attention that clients draw to aspects of themselves through what are called *identity markers*, in other words, self-labelling, evaluative language that positions them in a certain way as well as vocal tone. Intentionally listening out for clients' use of labels has enabled me to quickly discover the weight that they attribute to certain social categories, the extent to which they perceive that they have agency and control over their career, as well as their conscious or sub-conscious use of what influential Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) named *impression management*.

Here are three ways that speakers may mark out their identity through the words they choose and how they express themselves:

- IMPLICATURE (implicit rather than explicit statements) via choice of modifiers (adjectives or adverbs that provide additional information about the speaker's

attitude towards the noun) such as "it's **just** a job"; "I'm **only** an administrator"; "I see myself as having a **meaningful** career", can demonstrate individual stance on different types of work.

- Listening carefully for PROSODY – which is about rhythm and intonation patterns in speech can supply further data. In the English language, emphatically stressing certain words can alter the meaning of a phrase. For example, "I'm not motivated by **money**" suggests that the client is driven by 'something', though not financial reward. "**I'm** not motivated by money" could be self-positioning where the client contrasts their motivations with those of other people.
- NAMING through overt mention of professional titles such as Professor, Doctor, Captain, C-suite, Director, President, Chartered etcetera can be seen as factual self-description, but it can also reveal how the client conceptualises their social status or aspirations.

Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT)

Recently on Veilederforum.no, Even Edvardsen made a compelling case for practitioners to closely observe metaphors in career guidance. The article showed how clients could be supported in their career decision-making by bringing their initial ideas into more concrete existence through different metaphorical objects.

A significant impact in this field was made by American linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980 in a landmark text 'Metaphors we live by'. This work, which has been drawn on extensively in management studies and education, introduced CMT arguing that the concreteness that Edvardsen mentions is what we seek as humans when we are presented with abstract concepts. In trying to interpret an idea that cannot be touched or seen or heard, we go back to our early bodily and neurological experiences of the textures of artefacts, the sensation of movement, even our orientation, including whether we are standing up or lying down. Over time, some metaphors become conventionalised. For example, often in the West, a typical metaphor for career is that it is a path, rendering the idea of 'career' as the experience of going through space, towards one place or position and away from another.

I have found New Zealand based management scholar Kerr Inkson's paper 'Images of career: Nine key metaphors' (2004) helpful in accounting for the different ways clients conceptualise careers and working life. Where clients relate most to *path*, *craft*, *theatre*, *network* and *narrative* metaphors, it may indicate receptiveness to taking control by orientating themselves, becoming artisans in how they shape their careers, recognising the performative elements of work roles as well as spinning a web of connections and creating stories that convey their experiences and strengths. Where they associate with *legacy, seasons, matching,* and *economic* metaphors, recognition of the power of family history and external factors may rather incline clients to prioritise adaptiveness to situations they feel they cannot influence.

Conceptual metaphors originate intra-culturally; for example, by contrast with many Western societies, in some Chinese and other East Asian cultures, the future is *behind* and

the past is *ahead* and time can be thought of in terms of *up* and *down* (Boroditsky, 2001). Acknowledging this cultural dimension has encouraged me to discuss CMT with clients to avoid making assumptions about their aspirations and perceptions of career based on my own metaphorical traditions.

Taking it further?

It is my conclusion that engagement with applied linguistics, has elevated my practice in multiple ways. Greater clarity on the mechanics of communication means that I can equip my clients to maintain their career health through expressing themselves effectively and building advocacy. Absorbing socio-cognitive contexts that affect each client's perceptions of the world and how they interface with it differently, brings me deeper insights.

If your imagination has been captured by these brief introductions to just three theoretical approaches from the field of socio-cognitive linguistics, you may be interested to delve deeper into this rich area of research. The tools of applied linguistics could enable you to analyse career conversation transcripts, assess covert messaging within computer-mediated communication and examine policy documents and media articles, all with a view to harnessing the power of language to improve the experience of guidance.

Guest editor [Dr. Gill Frigerio, University of Warwick](), has processed and edited several articles on the topic of career guidance and other fields of study.

Resources for understanding more about linguistics

Linguithusiasm: Podcast in English for people interested in linguistics but with no prior knowledge. https://lingthusiasm.com

Words and Actions: Podcast in English about how language matters in business, politics and beyond. (Episode 29 is about language at work.)

Språkteigen: Podcast in Norwegian exploring a wide range of linguistic topics including dialects, language history, grammar and the evolution of Norwegian.

Språksnakk Podcast in Norwegian featuring conversations about language and communication in everyday life, covering how language affects culture and identity.

References

Burr, V., (2015) *Social Constructionism,* London: Routledge

Boroditsky, L., (2001) 'Does language shape thought?: Mandarin and English Speaker's Conceptions of Time'. *Cognitive Psychology, 43(1): 1-22*

Brown, P., and Levinson, S., (1987) *Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Bucholtz, M. and Hall, K. (2005). 'Identity and interaction: a sociocultural linguistic approach'. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4–5): 585–614.

Charteris-Black, J., (2011) *Politicians and Rhetoric – the persuasive power of metaphor.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Goffman, E., (1959) *The presentation of the self in everyday life.* New York: Doubleday

Holmes, J., and Stubbe, M. (2015) *Power and Politeness in the Workplace: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Talk at Work.* Abindon: Routledge

Inkson, K., (2004) 'Images of career: Nine key metaphors'. *Journal of vocational behavior. 65(1):96-111*

Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M., (1980) *Metaphors we live by.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Lakoff, R., (1990) *Talking power: The politics of language in our lives.* Glasgow: HarperCollins

Lakoff, R., (1973) The logic of politeness; or, minding your Ps and Qs. In *Papers from the Ninth Regional Meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society 1973:* 292-305

Leech, G., (2014) *The Pragmatics of Politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Romano, M., and Porto, M.D., (Eds) (2016) *Exploring Discourse Strategies in Social and Cognitive Interaction'* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company