

Doing it all at once Nexus analysis of complex work situations for executives

The complexity, mobility and multilingualism of modern society have led to many changes in work life. Professionals in a global work life have to manage a multitude of tasks simultaneously, in settings which are contesting the limits of time, space, languages and communicative channels.

Analysing complexity and superdiversity (Vertovec 2007, Blommaert/Rampton 2011) calls for developed methods. Superdiversity and mobility have a significant impact on work life and make it necessary to “rethink linguistic communication” (Blommaert 2010: xi) both in on- and off-line settings (cf. Jonsson/Muhonen 2014). In a pilot study of executives’ daily activities, Nexus Analysis (Scollon/Scollon 2004) is applied. In Nexus Analysis, the relation between social, individual and discursive aspects are systematically studied. The discursive aspect includes linguistic and multimodal phenomena, as well as those concerning artifacts, place and mobility.

The data consist of observations of executives’ work days and interviews at five commercial companies in Sweden. The data were constructed by our students for the project “Professional Communication and Digital Media - Complexity, Mobility and Multilingualism in the Global Workplace”.

The results show that executives often do several things simultaneously. The analysis concentrates on business meetings, which we regard as a *nexus of practice* (Scollon 2001, Scollon/Scollon 2004) in the sense that different social practices are acted out at once, such as doing business, networking, writing, reading, making decisions etc. Below, we will highlight two such aspects.

Firstly, the use of digital tools is interconnected with the use of several languages. Our data includes situations where the executives and their colleagues applied digital media to 1) comment about overseas participants’ “bad English” (a type of ‘asides’ while in mute set on video conference system) and 2) write digital messages to each other in Swedish during meetings conducted in English. Thus, some meeting participants in a dominant position engage in a parallel interaction, hidden from some of the participants, of which some have a subordinate position when it comes to linguistic resources and being geographically distant.

Secondly, our data bring forth that executives may be invited to meetings merely for the inviter to later be able to claim that s/he “is in on it”. In Nexus Analysis one can categorize this as a matter of ‘historical body’; the person in her/himself is important in sense of an individual with a certain history and future. References to the person can be regarded as a discursive practice of great relevance in the business domain, which does not seem to be covered by research.

To conclude, simultaneous practices are intertwined with power relations both locally and internationally. Power is ‘inscribed’ (Lillis 2013: 126) in individuals who can function as means for others to get their actions performed. In the same situation, an executive can simultaneously be in and out of power. The social distribution of resources such as linguistic competencies and power are not clear-cut, but complex and differing. The concept of superdiversity can be relevant also for high status settings such as commercial companies.

Keywords: Business Meetings, Complexity, Multilingual Workplace, Management, Nexus Analysis, Professional Communication, Superdiversity

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