

THE PROCESS OF KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

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Abstract – Considering the cognitive nature of knowledge and its dynamic dialogic features, this contribution explores three lines of inquiry: the analysis of models built to visually represent the process of knowledge dissemination, the relationship between knowledge dissemination and discourse, and lastly the interrelation between knowledge dissemination and ethical issues. The models analyzed have been built within disciplines other than linguistics, but evidence is provided that they can be also applied to language analysis and its communicative purposes. Indeed, most of the models include ‘language’ as the interface between knowledge dissemination and disciplinary contents. On the other hand, linguists are interested in language analysis as a tool to transmit knowledge through appropriate strategies. The need for this cooperative principle and interaction in knowledge exchange, together with the enlargement of communities of practice and discourse, is shown in this contribution. Ethics plays a big role in knowledge dissemination, especially as communication technologies have significantly amplified the risk of developing false information and unethical attitudes. This aspect is discussed with reference to the fields of medicine, law and economics. The concluding reflections lead to underlining contacts and connections between linguistics and other domains, particularly from a methodological point of view. Although a unification of knowledge is unthinkable, interdisciplinarity is necessary to get a broader understanding of some aspects of knowledge and overcome disciplinary fragmentation.

Keywords: knowledge dissemination; transmission models; knowledge dissemination and discourse; interdisciplinarity.

*I love the freedom of creativity when our
ideas come together to create new ones and
then spread. The knowledge of one becomes
the knowledge of millions.
My name is Tim Berners-Lee.
I invented the World Wide Web.
(An Interview – youtube.com)*

1. Introduction

In its “What we do” webpage, the *Global Institute for Water, Environment and Health* (GIWEH) defines Knowledge Dissemination (KD) as “the willing transfer of knowledge with the intention that it be used for education or to help implement modified or new practices”. Obviously, the process of KD

may have a purely intellectual purpose, but this study focuses in particular on the possible applications. In light of this, two levels of analysis seem appropriate: on the one hand, the empowerment of the individual and, on the other, knowledge management.

Because of its complex nature and its relationship to the features of discourse, knowledge – and consequently knowledge management and transfer – represents a stimulating challenge for researchers in the linguistic sciences. Bondi (2017), in her interview to a highly specialized journal, underlined two fundamental principles:

- Knowledge dissemination is the transfer of knowledge within and across communication settings. The expectation is that the knowledge will be used by the receiver to change practices or viewpoints or for intellectual growth.
- The process of research is that of increasing the stock of available knowledge [...] This requires research skills, but also the ability to communicate with other specialists both within and outside one's own field of expertise. (Bondi 2017, pp. 64-66)

In the first principle, a clear definition of knowledge dissemination is given, as 'transfer of knowledge' (which implies both accumulation and saving of knowledge) in peer-to-peer communication inside a specific community of practice, in different cultural contexts or in asymmetrical relationships, for example from expert to laypeople, and also across disciplines. The second principle highlights the importance of enlarging the quantity of knowledge in society today, and refining the 'ability to communicate', that is developing the language used to transmit knowledge, which is what we as linguists are more specifically involved in. It is also important to be aware of possible mechanisms of persuasion and manipulation deriving from both cultural background and ideology.

Given the cognitive nature of knowledge and its dynamic dialogic attitude (Salvi 2019), this contribution develops three main themes: 1. The analysis of models built to represent the process of knowledge dissemination; 2. The relationship between discourse and knowledge dissemination; 3. The interrelation between knowledge dissemination and ethical issues.

Although there is widespread agreement about the fact that no model can be exhaustive in itself, and that very complex models often remain largely unused and unexploited, current literature insists on the need to refer to theoretical models to better understand, plan and evaluate strategies for effective knowledge dissemination. The models analysed here have been built within disciplines and discourse communities other than linguistics (for example, Graham *et al.*'s model, 2006). Indeed, these models are based on the concept of moving knowledge into action, stressing the value of theories and strategies to be learnt and applied, and most of them also consider

‘language’ as the interface between knowledge dissemination and disciplinary contents.

On their part, linguists recognize that discourse is “a form of knowledge and memory” (Wodak 2002, p. 8) and it represents “the flow of knowledge – and/or all societal knowledge stored – throughout all time” (Jäger 2004, p. 129). Discourse, therefore, guarantees knowledge dissemination through appropriate techniques which are the object of investigation by linguists. The relationship between knowledge and ideology, as well as the intertwining between knowledge dissemination and ethical issues are also discussed in this contribution, as modern communication technologies have significantly amplified the risk of false information and unethical attitudes developing. All these broad themes represent a challenge for linguists to enlarge their investigations into an increasingly interdisciplinary perspective.

2. Methods and models in knowledge dissemination

The description of knowledge dissemination as a process has been a fundamental area of interest in the studies carried out in national research projects and widely explored in workshops, panels and conferences in recent years, from both a theoretical and an applied approach. For instance, the PRIN/CLAVIER Workshop held in Rome-Sapienza in 2015 developed insights from sociology, science and linguistics (Salvi, Bowker 2015). The same interdisciplinary approach has been adopted to study the discursive construction, maintenance and repairing of trust, a typical element in knowledge dissemination (Salvi, Turnbull 2017).

In the following excerpt *The Economist* aptly illustrates the difficulties researchers face in the process of the growth and enlargement of knowledge as well as in knowledge management, especially in an interdisciplinary aggregation. Moreover, the creation and diffusion of knowledge, in its transformation from being a mere repository of information to becoming a form of transmissible knowledge, is achieved through complex discursive processes.

The accumulation of knowledge is in some ways a burden. The more is known, the more researchers must absorb before they can add to the stock of human knowledge – or the more they must collaborate with other researchers to combine their areas of expertise. (*The Economist* Sept. 30, 2017, p. 70)

Therefore, this contribution starts with an analysis of some KD models built within disciplines and discourse communities other than linguistics, which

can, nevertheless, represent the flow of the knowledge transfer process and the relevant steps and strategies.

An overwhelming number of models have been proposed, “[...] as many as 63 different theories or models of knowledge transfer across fields” (Ward *et al.* 2009, p. 157). One of the most influential models was constructed by Ian D. Graham, Professor at the School of Epidemiology, Public Health and Preventive Medicine, University of Ottawa, together with a group of scholars who elaborated the concept of moving knowledge into action. In the first part of their paper Graham *et al.* (2006, pp. 15-16) report basic definitions of multiple terms which are often used interchangeably, such as:

- knowledge translation: “the exchange, synthesis and ethically-sound application of knowledge within a complex system of interactions among researchers and users [...]”;
- knowledge transfer: “a systematic approach to capture, collect and share tacit knowledge in order for it to become explicit knowledge. By doing so, this process allows for individuals and/or organizations to access and utilize essential information, which previously was known intrinsically to only one or a small group of people”;
- knowledge exchange: “collaborative problem-solving between researchers and decision makers that happens through linkage and exchange. Effective knowledge exchange involves interaction between decision makers and researchers and results in mutual learning through the process of planning, producing, disseminating, and applying existing or new research in decision-making”;
- knowledge dissemination: “the spreading of knowledge or research, such as is done in scientific journals and at scientific conferences”;
- knowledge diffusion: “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system”.

In these definitions there are many concepts which can be usefully applied to linguistic studies, as for example the enlargement of communities of practice and discourse, the diffusion of knowledge together with skills, the cooperative principle and interaction in knowledge exchange, the use of specific channels, the role of scientific press and conventions, as well as the ethical perspective in the transfer and translation of knowledge. They are all pre-requisites in developing knowledge, transferring research results between universities, organizations and wider communities with a positive attitude.

The model shown later in the article (Graham *et al.* 2006, p. 19, see Figure 1) deserves attention for three reasons. First of all, although it comes from the medical community, it has nothing to do with the discourse of medicine, as it is built in an organizational perspective to improve a health

care system, one of the most complex areas of management. Second, in their paper the Authors equate ‘knowledge dissemination’ with ‘knowledge translation’, which raises the question of the meaning of ‘translation’.

Apart from the process of translating words or texts from one language into another, the *Oxford Dictionary* shows other interesting entries, such as the one in the domain of Mathematics where translation is “the movement of a body from one point of space to another such that every point of the body moves in the same direction and over the same distance, without any rotation, reflection, or change in size.” Hence, if we adopt this denotation, we reject the temptation to alter in any way the quality of the knowledge we want to transmit, clearly adopting an ethical perspective.

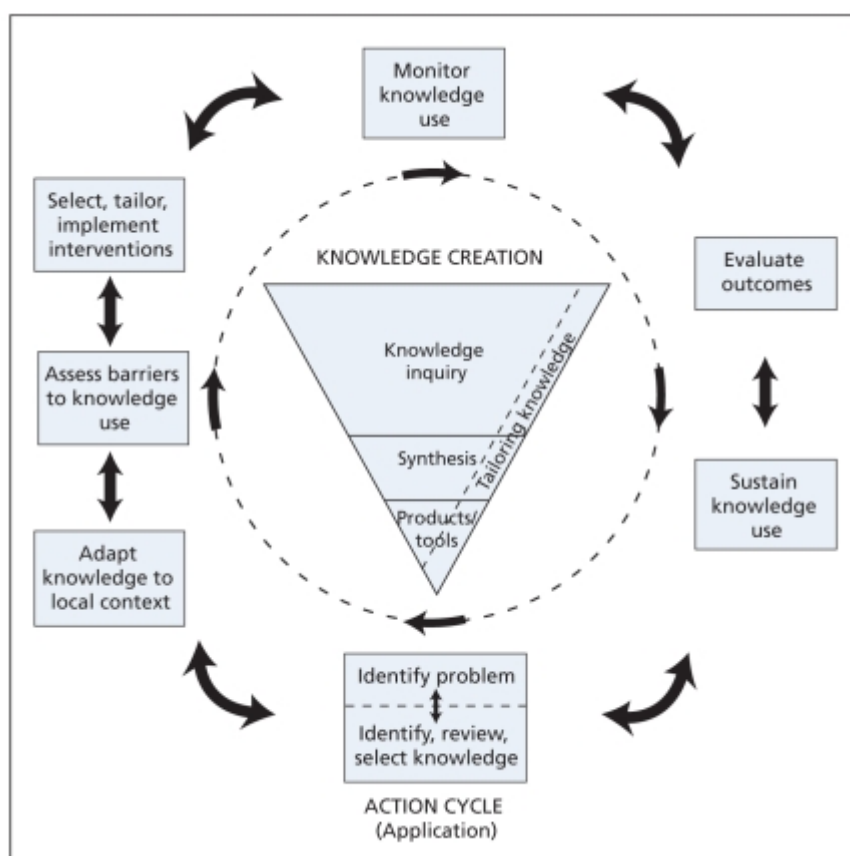


Figure 1

The knowledge-to-action framework (Graham *et al.* 2006, p. 19).

The third reason of interest is that the model is based on the concept of moving knowledge into action. In other words, the process of knowledge translation integrates knowledge creation and knowledge application, so it is a process based on the value of learning – both theories and strategies – and putting into practice. The process is described as dynamic and iterative; it is also flexible because, although it is drawn as a cycle, specialists may need to use the phases out of sequence, depending on the project. Moreover, it takes

into account the end-users of the knowledge (*adapt knowledge to local context*, for example) to ensure that knowledge and its subsequent implementation are relevant to their needs. This corresponds exactly to the objectives to be pursued by linguists, particularly the active use of knowledge by the receiver and the ability to communicate, which can be related to one of the ‘barriers to knowledge use’ indicated in Graham’s model.

The same model has been adopted and adapted by the *Canadian Institutes of Health Research* to promote the application of research and for the process of knowledge translation. The global knowledge translation model proposed by *CIHR* (Sudsawad 2007) results in the following Figure 2.

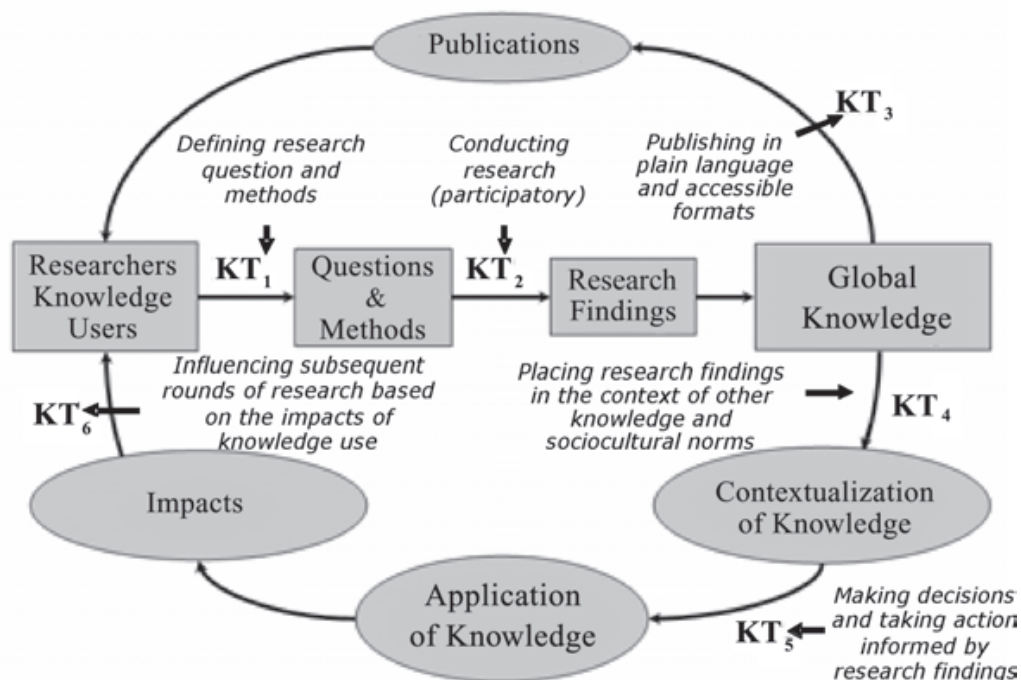


Figure 2

CIHR research cycle and the six opportunities to facilitate KT.

In the figure we can observe the introduction of six opportunities within the research cycle when helpful interactions can take place. These opportunities are:

- KT1: Defining research questions and methodologies;
- KT2: Conducting research (as in the case of participatory research);
- KT3: Publishing research findings in plain language and accessible formats;
- KT4: Placing research findings in the context of other knowledge and sociocultural norms;
- KT5: Making decisions and taking action informed by research findings;

- **KT6: Influencing subsequent rounds of research based on the impacts of knowledge use.**

They can be easily applied to linguistic studies as well. Both figures show the importance of language, either in terms of language/plain language used or in view of the sociocultural settings involved in knowledge dissemination. In this specific context, all these knowledge translation capabilities go in the direction of an application of knowledge to some practical tasks.

3. Knowledge dissemination and discourse

So far, we have considered how we, as linguists, can approach methods and models originally belonging to other disciplines. However, the models can be suitable to the analysis of many linguistic encounters, such as those concerning English for Specific Purposes, or multimedia communication. This paragraph will first show how other disciplines position language in their specific domains, and then give an example of how other disciplines adopt linguistic tools to treat knowledge issues, particularly knowledge dissemination and management.

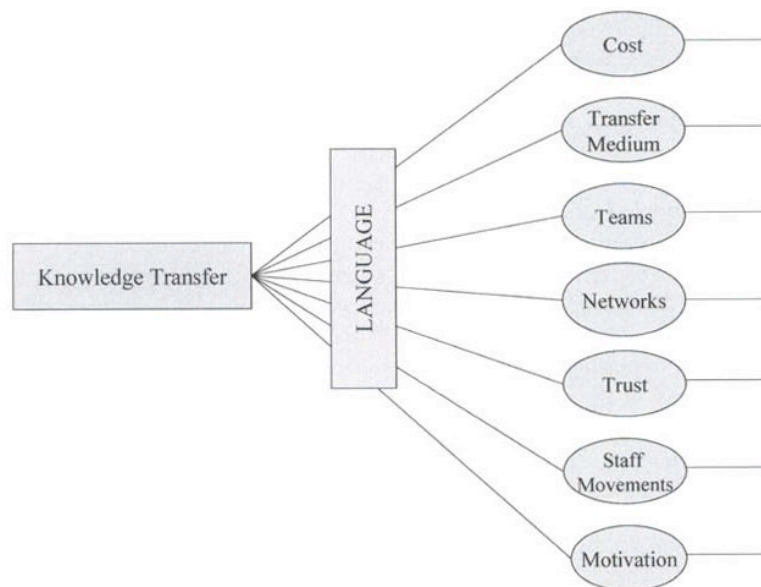


Figure 3

Language Lens on International Knowledge Transfer (Welch, Welch 2008, p. 346).

As far as the first point is concerned, Figure 3 shows the relevance of language as the interface between knowledge transfer and the seven factors which are identified as the most influential in the international knowledge transfer process within multinational companies. In the article the Authors state that “[...] in and of itself, language is a mental model, framing activity and behaviour; it is part of the mindscape” (Welch, Welch 2008, p. 341):

therefore, they argue that language is sufficiently important in its own right to warrant a focused treatment. Their perspective is to understand language not just as a simple vehicle for carrying meaning, but rather as a medium that activates cultural meaning systems. In their contribution, “language” is equated with “English”, although the Authors recognize that the rise of China as a global economic power will define different scenarios in future. Therefore, given English as a *lingua franca* in their fields of international business and marketing, they outline the ways in which multinationals tend to move towards the use of a common corporate language in cross-cultural communication to facilitate knowledge transfer and avoid barriers and distortions. They emphasize also the relationship between language and context, as well as the role of language in establishing a level of trust to encourage the exchange of knowledge (Welch, Welch 2008, p. 348; see also Salvi, Turnbull 2017).

They go even further, however, in developing the concept of a “reconfiguration agent” to convey the sense of how language affects the total system within which knowledge transfer takes place.

By commencing with the fundamental communication model [the relationship between sender and receiver, and the process of encoding/decoding], we have shown how language impinges in a direct fashion on the basic international knowledge transfer act. However, the impact of language goes beyond that. It determines aspects such as who has the information and knowledge, whether and how it is articulated, when and if it is shared, and in what form. We have demonstrated how language may affect sender transfer capacity, recipient absorptive capacity, and operative influences [as shown in the figure]. Through reconfiguring these various elements, language generates ongoing impacts beyond a simple one-off knowledge transfer act – for example, through its contribution to the development of social capital. That is, language is simultaneously an active agent in the knowledge transfer process itself, as well as influencing the background set of determinants. (Welch, Welch 2008, pp. 353-54).

The dynamic influence of language on the whole knowledge transfer system can also be observed in the second point in this paragraph, that is the use of linguistic tools to treat knowledge issues, particularly knowledge dissemination and management, in view of improving learning.

Another key issue in knowledge dissemination studies is the notion of ‘Community of Practice’. Indeed, in an article written by Hafeez and Alghatas (2007), professors at the School of Management at Bradford University (UK), the Authors first describe the features of a Community of Practice in order to identify the devices necessary for knowledge management and transfer. Following previous studies, they assume that Communities of Practice represent an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge and the main tool for converting implicit knowledge into an

explicit form of knowledge. Research in this field is not irrelevant to linguistics. Moreover, their knowledge transfer model includes four modes, all related to linguistic activities (Hafeez, Alghatas 2007, p. 30): socialization (the acquisition of tacit knowledge directly from others through shared experience, observation, imitation); externalisation (realized by meaningful dialogues or reflections); combination (the diffusion of explicit knowledge in context); internalisation (the process of “learning by doing” through a verbalisation and documentation of experiences). To better understand the concepts and their connections in their field, the Authors adopt Spradley’s model (1980) shown below (Table 1):

Level of investigation	Description
Domain analysis	This means capturing the parts or elements of cultural meaning that occur in the conversation by identifying the discrete set of moves used by the participants.
Taxonomic analysis	This is a search for the way that the cultural domains are organised. It usually involves drawing a graphical interpretation of the ways in which the individual participants move, form groups and patterns that structure the conversation.
Componential analysis	This means searching for the attributes of the terms in each domain, the characteristic phrases or sentences that tend to recur within each category of moves.
Theme analysis	The last and final step is to search for patterns or recurrent relationships among domains. If certain moves or language functions tend to enhance learning, then these patterns need to be identified.

Table 1

Investigation levels for discourse analysis (Hafeez, Alghatas 2007; Spradley 1980).

Furthermore, the Authors consider storytelling an effective communicative strategy for transmitting knowledge, as this communication tool serves a number of different purposes, such as explaining complex concepts and expressing personal experiences in an informal way, which can be helpful for converting knowledge into a form that is easier for others to understand. Aren’t we, as linguists, close to this?

4. The role of linguistics in knowledge dissemination

We have seen scientific communities acknowledge that language and discourse represent an important condition in the process of knowledge dissemination, so much so that discourse analysis is of fundamental significance in every academic, professional or institutional encounter, together with all the virtual contacts on the web in any sector of human communication. These have all been the objects of research in many

conferences and meetings organized within the framework of national and international projects, and most of the findings have already been published.

As linguists, we can agree that knowledge means all types of content which is consciously acquired and used to interpret and shape the surrounding reality. Everyday knowledge transmitted in schools, families and the media as well as specialized knowledge produced and conveyed by the various sciences equally deserve interest and give us a great deal to think about.

Knowledge is recognized as a cognitive activity. This point is underlined, for example, in an article written by an economist, Joanne Roberts, who draws a distinction between knowledge, information and data (Roberts 2000, p. 430). She states that data is “a series of observations, measurements, or facts”; information is “data that have been arranged into a meaningful pattern”; knowledge is “the application and productive use of information [...]; it involves an awareness or understanding gained through experience, familiarity or learning”. They are not developed in a linear hierarchy of process, and language features can also be intertwined.

Discourse analysis literature amply remarks on the cognitive nature of knowledge, to such a great degree that just a few examples suffice. As already mentioned, Ruth Wodak views “discourse as a form of knowledge and memory” (2002, p. 8), whilst Siegfried Jäger defines discourse “as the flow of knowledge – and/or all societal knowledge stored – throughout all time” (2004, p. 129), thus almost identifying discourse and knowledge in their social perspective. Lastly, van Dijk (2014) traces the cognitive processes related to the linguistic and discursive management of knowledge, and paves the way for epistemic discourse analysis (EDA). Unsurprisingly, however, these three language analysts agree on the cognitive dimension of knowledge, and also connect ‘knowledge’ to ‘ideology’. Indeed, the word ‘ideology’ has often been associated with a negative meaning in terms of misguided beliefs and biases. But it is not always so. For instance, if we think of very simple forms of communication, such as proverbs and sayings, which originate from popular traditions, we immediately perceive that the shared knowledge and wisdom of a community and the whole belief system of a group of people are transmitted in short sentences, from one generation to the next, keeping the original meaning. However, van Dijk states that – although our socially shared knowledge cannot possibly ‘escape’ its ideological boundedness – we cannot assume that all our knowledge is ideologically biased (van Dijk 2008, p. 6; see also Garzone, Catenaccio 2008). Therefore, if we really want to overcome the old opposition and dualism between knowledge and ideology, where knowledge is simply true belief and ideology false belief, we have to take a step forward including the analysis of language in expressing ethical issues. At the present time communication technologies have significantly

amplified the risk of developing false information and unethical attitudes. The very concept of ‘ethics’ has become manifold and deserves attention, both if we consider ethics as a system of moral principles from a theoretical viewpoint, and if we look on it as the correct behaviour of individuals and institutions.

Ethical principles are inherent in our academic activity, either in the discovery of knowledge through research or in its dissemination through teaching. Once again, an interdisciplinary approach seems to be appropriate to encompass both contents and verbal behaviour. In recent years, the field of medicine has been a gold mine of statements about ethical principles and definitions of moral behaviour in both the treatment of diseases and the management of health care. Many issues have caused serious disputes all over the world, which have contributed to the spreading and popularization of specific lexicon (such as *stem cell cloning*, *elective abortion*, *organ grafting*, and so on) on the one side, on the other they have also provided fuel for argumentation strategies and new media where the debate on cultural norms and values has broad scope. The publication of specialized journals, such as *Ethics and Medicine*, is a confirmation. The same is happening in the legal field, where the binding body of rules set by a government is often compared to or contrasting with ethical positions adopted by people: in this case we know how the linguistic boundaries between, for example, deontic and epistemic modality can be altered and modified. An updated vision of the contemporary scenario can be found in a recent book, *Ethics and Law*, by W. Bradley Wendel (2014). The legal conflict between corporate and personal knowledge is discussed, for instance, in a paper written by Baskerville and Dulipovici (2006) in which the Authors discuss whether a company “owns” the knowledge of its employees or their knowledge falls under the personal privacy jurisdiction. The image below (Figure 4) shows that individual rights can collide with the interests of a company on the basis of a defence of human rights, framed by cultural values that belong to local/national realities, which can be in contrast with organizational norms.

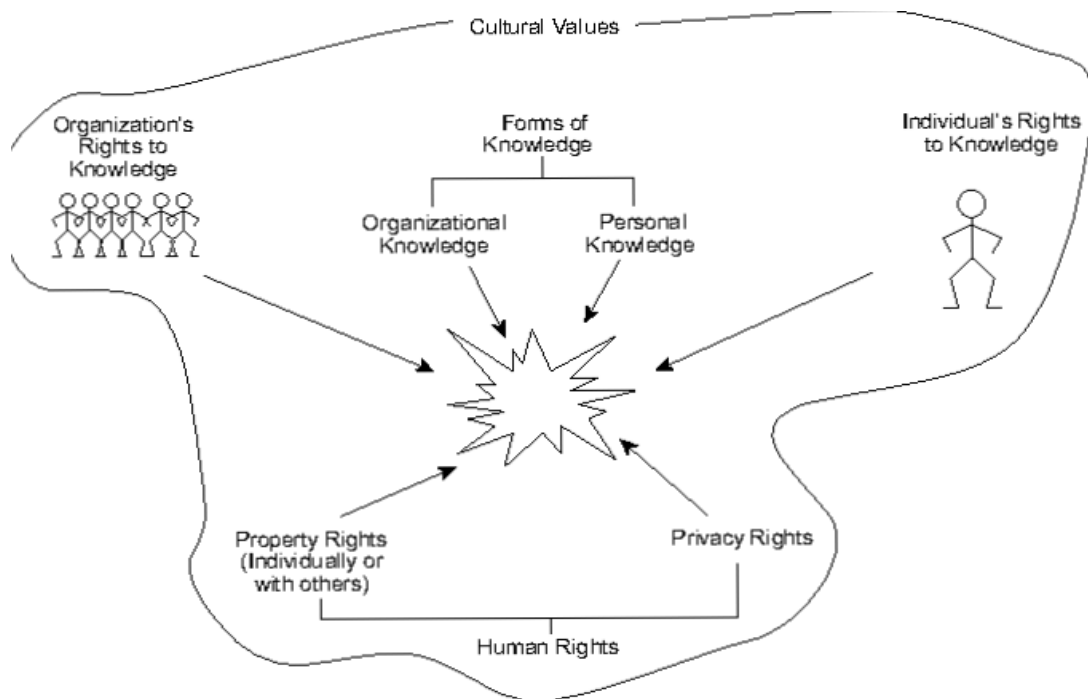


Figure 4

Property or Privacy Rights in Knowledge Transfer? Sources of ethical conflict in knowledge management (Baskerville, Dulipovici 2006).

A final consideration concerns the “ethics and economics” relationship. In his paper “Economics for Ethics” (2011), Thomas Wells, professor of Business Ethics at the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences, builds a bridge between the two apparently contrasting disciplines when he says that “economics is an ethical science, an important branch of applied moral philosophy” and “a great deal of economics is concerned with ethical issues”. Ethics, he says, is not only about being “nice and fair” to other people, and economics is not only a means of translating individual selfishness into general wealth. The fact that economists have to cope with scarcity and suggest solutions is a sign of ethical involvement. And this implies a high level of ideology to affirm identity.

Language, in all branches and genres of economics, delivers the sender’s stance through which knowledge is transmitted. It may be the case of academic lectures, the most prestigious form of knowledge transfer, where personal and institutional identity are always externalized. The authorial voice of the speaker expressed by the frequent use of ‘I’ in this genre, as well as the use of “we” with different meanings (establishing contact between the speaker and the audience, or referring to both economists as a discourse community and the developed industrialized countries) aptly combines identity and ideology in knowledge transmission (Salvi 2013). Another example can be found in corporate language in which companies appeal to customers adopting discursive strategies ranging from rhetorical questions to

metaphors, re-formulating technical information in simplified forms, performing articulated strategies in the process of concretization and re-writing (Salvi 2015, 2016).

5. Final remarks

This contribution has been partly inspired by a recent article, “A procedural approach to ethical critique in CDA” (Fairclough and Fairclough 2018) in which ethical critique, usually addressed to actions, is extended to social practices and institutions. Critical Discourse Analysis is defined as a social science method which needs an ethical commitment to impartiality. The Author’s distinction between ‘concepts’ and ‘conceptions’ can be an effective tool for interpreting ideology-loaded words, such as ‘fairness’, ‘justice’ or ‘freedom’, in different contexts. The focus of inquiry is on ‘practical argumentation’ in discourse, that is the type of strategies used to evaluate the arguments at issue and the proposals to be tested. Comparison and evaluation of different arguments, expressed principally through language, contribute to ‘discourse ethics’.

This chapter has tried to shed light on contacts and connections between linguistics and other domains, particularly from a methodological point of view. Sharing a set of methods, principles and theoretical models, as well as adopting quantitative and qualitative techniques, can be beneficial for scholars of different disciplines. As Ken Robinson says, “Creativity depends on interactions between feeling and thinking, and across different disciplinary boundaries and fields of ideas” (2011, p. 17). Therefore, the concept of interdisciplinarity, which has been a buzzword for a long time, is gaining prominence in teaching and research, despite barriers in both academic structures and corporate settings.

The complete unification and homogenization of knowledge is unthinkable. Nevertheless interdisciplinarity, with its different types of approaches (such as multi-, cross-, inter- and trans-), is necessary to get a broader understanding of some common themes and overcome disciplinary fragmentation. A deeper insight into knowledge production and the transmission process is certainly intertwined with interdisciplinarity.

An intriguing view on the relationship between language and interdisciplinarity can be found in a paper by Bracken and Oughton (2006) where the Authors (one of whom works in the field of geography and the other in rural economics) clearly focus on language as an important aspect of interdisciplinary practice in the development and implementation of research (2006, p. 373). Language, they say, evolves in everyday use and it also evolves in its use within disciplines. They report an appropriate example of variation in writing style when they state: “[...] in physical sciences the use

of the first person is rare, and writing distances the researcher from the object of research, whereas in social sciences the first person is used as a means of acknowledging the role and responsibility of the investigator” (2006, p. 375).

As far as lexicon is concerned, they give the example of the adjective “dynamic” as a point of contrast in different disciplines (physical geography vs social sciences), within which the word has a different meaning (as the Authors say, a word can belong to different *dialects*, that is the specific jargon of a discipline).

Dynamic has both everyday meanings and discipline specific meanings. As an adverb, the OED (1993) defines dynamic as ‘of force in actual operation’, and this was understood and implicitly used by both participants in the conversation. The problem lay in the differences in the perceived time and spatial scales to which dynamic referred between disciplinary and normal use. To the physical geographer, dynamic meant that stream discharge would be variable depending on the antecedent moisture conditions of the catchment over very short timescales of a few hours to a few days. The social scientists understood dynamic to mean relatively rapid changes over longer timescales, undefined. This confusion could easily have been clarified on the spot had we recognized this as a dialect word. The implications for planning the research in the field were huge, and snowballed from a very simple misunderstanding. This example shows how we got to very different endpoints from a poor matching of understanding of one word. In the company of experts of the same discipline, this misunderstanding would (probably) not have happened. (Bracken, Oughton 2006, pp. 376-377)

An increasingly interdisciplinary perspective therefore seems an essential factor in KD and can offer solutions to the problem of knowledge accumulation and management underlined in the article of *The Economist* which informed some reflections in this paper.

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