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Discourse at Work: What is it and how can we study it?

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This paper aims to provide an overview of the field of 'Workplace Discourse', beginning with a consideration of what is meant by this term as compared to other terms, such as 'institutional' or 'professional' discourse. A useful starting point for identifying what is distinctive about workplace discourse is to compare it with discourse that does not take place at work, namely 'social' or 'everyday' discourse.

Having narrowed down the object of study, I will then outline a variety of methodological approaches that have been used in researching workplace discourse, such as conversation analysis, genre analysis, and corpus research, reviewing the special perspectives and insights each of these approaches can offer. At the same time, this will provide the opportunity to review some key findings about workplace discourse identified through these methodological approaches.

Research in workplace discourse frequently has a strong practical focus, and some practical workplace problem may often be what motivates the research in the first place. Therefore, the talk will conclude with some considerations of ways in which research on workplace discourse is relevant for and can have an impact on workplace practice and training in such areas as the teaching of languages for work.

Almut Koester is Senior Lecturer in English Language in the Department of English at the University of Birmingham. She has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from the University of Nottingham, and is author of The Language of Work (2004), Investigating Workplace Discourse (2006) and The Language of Work (2010). Her research focuses on spoken workplace discourse and business corpora and her publications have examined genre, relational language, vague language and idioms in business and workplace contexts. She is also actively involved in applying research findings to English language teaching and is co-author of a new three-level Business English course, Business Advantage, published by Cambridge University Press (2012).