

Language awareness in consulting, communications and campaigning

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A list of questions

- Why do language workers need language awareness?
- What level of language awareness do language workers have?
How could it be raised?
- (Why) should applied linguists (not) contribute to the commodification of language?
- Who wants and/or needs critical language awareness? Whose wishes take priority?
- (How) can we solve the conundrum of the critical consultant?

My CV

- From 2000 to 2004: teaching Business English, including at the WU
- Since 2000: research – much of it critical – on corporate and health communication
- Since 2008: teaching an undergraduate course on corporate communication
- Since 2009: freelancing as a language consultant



So, I have some 'embodied meta-expertise' (© Crispin Thurlow) as a language worker.

Language workers

‘Within the wider world of language-dependent working, we also find “wordsmiths”, professional language workers for whom **words are** not only an essential resource for securing and managing work, but are **the predominant focus and product** of their work.

Language here is not only something to be bought and sold, but also something to be **crafted and designed** in highly considered, institutionalized ways.’ (Thurlow, 2015)

‘jobs/positions related to soft skills and communication, especially those which are not normally accessible directly through education, such as communication consultant, speechwriter, copywriter, in-house communication trainer, leadership and management coach, organisational applied linguist’ (Darics et al., 2016)

What is asked of language workers – and what they need

‘You’d like to **create a single narrative** that covers what [the client]

This is impossible to operationalise, let alone deliver,
without

- **explicit knowledge** of how language works in different contexts
- a **meta-language** to describe and explain linguistic data
- the ability to **translate** the findings back into the client’s language

‘You
talk
sim
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not

But where can a language worker get such knowledge,
resources and skills?

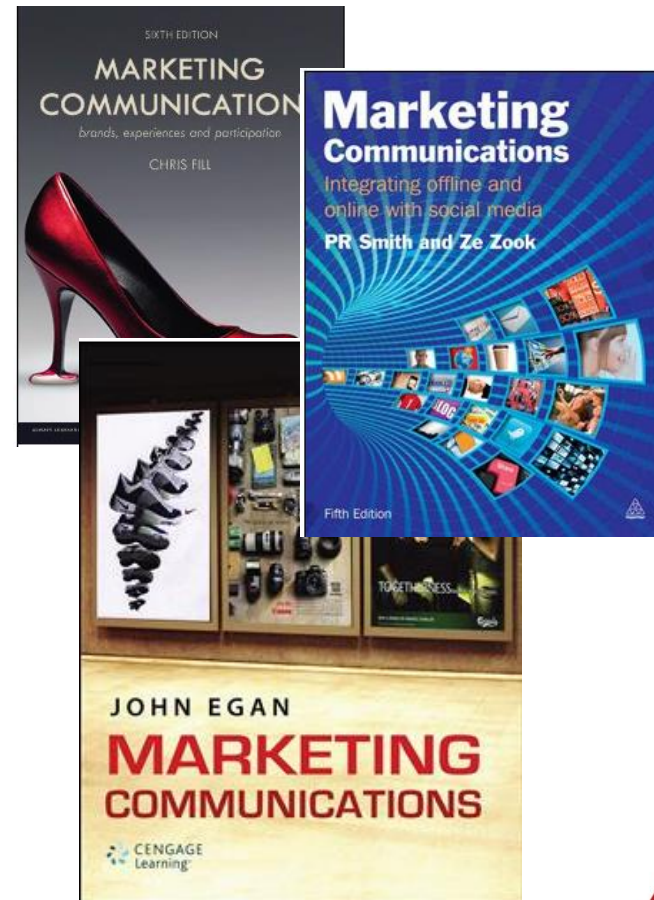
framework.

Communications textbooks

A quick look at marketing communications textbooks:

communications theory, communications tools (e.g. sponsorship), media mix, content

‘even if such popular prescriptive books do provide linguistic advice, it is usually presented in the form of simplified scripts based on intuition and recollection rather than direct observation of what actually happens’ (Clifton, 2012, p. 285)



Ignores the need to adapt language use to context

Interviewees

Private sector

PrS 1-9

- Chief operating officer, brand consulting company
- Online marketing manager, retail company
- PR assistant, TV channel
- *Founder, forensic text analysis company*
- *Managing partner, language consulting company*
- *Founder, safety and communications consulting company*
- *Senior analyst for leadership development, investment bank*
- *Senior analyst, healthcare communications consulting*
- *Lead design researcher, design company*

Public sector

PuS 10-11

- Communications advisor, central government
- Head of communications, TV company

Published in Babel magazine (www.babelzine.com) and Career Profiles in Linguistics (<http://careerlinguist.com/profiles-in-linguistics/> [sic])

Third sector

ThS 12-13

- Digital project manager, think tank
- Director of global campaigns, think tank

Interviewees

Professional language work is done by people with a **variety of backgrounds**:

linguistics, computing, history, anthropology, film studies,
journalism, no university degree

Language workers use a **variety of frameworks**:

corpus linguistics, computational linguistics, interactional
sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, discourse analysis,
cognitive semantics etc.

Interview questions

- A. What is your educational background and what is your current position at work? How did your career start? **What knowledge did you get from your degree that you need for your work?**
- B. How is your work time structured? How much time do you have to produce or analyse texts? **What processes do you apply in producing or analysing texts**, i.e. how do you go about it?
- C. How do you see the **relation between linguists** working in academia **and language workers** in other contexts? Where do you see points of shared interests and possible collaboration?

Language awareness in language workers: quotes

‘We want people with **good writing skills**: broad vocabulary, no clichés, interesting and exciting copy.’ (PuS11)

‘A lot of deliberation [in writing press releases] is around **word choices**’ (ThS12)

‘things that were a bit mystifying ... just the choice of words, very specific jargon was used, technical terms ... I would be critical towards perhaps **too lengthy and complicated** ways of expressing things’ (PuS10)

‘How distinctive a business’s writing is, and what it says about them is **still largely down to the intuition** of our writers. They pore over tens of thousands of words and spot patterns and themes, [e.g.] do some areas of the business sound more formal than others? ... The crucial next step is to make it persuasive, or warm, or surprising, or whatever effect it is you’re after.’ (PrS5)

Applied linguists and language workers

To enable professionals to identify what linguistic strategies function effectively in given context, their attention needs to be directed to language-in-action and to the underlying mechanisms. Doing so allows professionals to observe, reflect on and internalise linguistic and discursive practices.

- Applied linguists writing textbooks on business communications: e.g. Köster & Handford 2012, Mautner 2014, Darics & Koller forthcoming; also Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2013)
- Applied linguists researching language work(ers)
- **Applied linguists collaborating with practitioners** to combine insider knowledge and analytic language awareness (see Sarangi 2002)
- Applied linguists doubling as language workers

Language workers on their relationship with linguists

Linguists are needed...

‘it would be good for a comms department to sit down with linguists and for them to work together in analysing what makes for a successful approach’ (PrS3)

‘We are keen to work with universities ... I’ve never had any official training [in linguistics] and in fact I rely on people who have very heavily ... [Linguists] could illuminate how language keeps us locked into a certain logic ... we really need the insights of linguistics, desperately.’ (ThS13)

‘Because we don’t have a linguist on our team, it is quite hard to translate what we do for the marketing world; we’re just techies.’ (PrS1)

... but they are slow...

‘it’s quite hard work putting a new idea into academia because whereas on one hand we give it to business and they will run with it ..., you give it to academics and obviously it needs the rigour sitting behind it ... it makes for a very slow start.’ (ThS12)

Language workers on their relationship with linguists

...their writing style and focus is different...

‘Most people (especially in academia!) think their writing has to sound “sophisticated” to be effective.’ (PrS5)

‘I got very frustrated that I was researching all this stuff and it never got used in the real world ... I got 50-odd papers but to me they are irrelevant compared to having it used in the real world.’ (PrS1)

‘For a linguist, you may find a specific linguistic form and its function interesting, but if it’s something that is not relevant to a larger audience then it may not be the most important. A design perspective ... involves caring about your participants more than pursuit of your specific discipline.’ (PrS9)

...and what they teach is not always useful:

‘[the module] “language in the workplace” also opened up the topic of language in a crisis, but to be honest it’s wildly different actually working on this side of it than analysing externally.’ (PrS3)

Language workers on their relationship with linguists

It's not always clear to language workers what they could offer linguists...

'I was invited to talk about my work to students at the university. So it is possible for both the practitioners to be invited into academia so that students can learn about the activities of a practitioner.' (PuS10)

'The bridges between practitioners and academics in these areas are unbelievably weak. I remember when I met [name of linguist] and brought him to [name of NGO] he said "I'm amazed anyone's listening, I've been saying this for 20 years."' (ThS13)

Language awareness in clients

...and they often find it more important to raise awareness in clients:

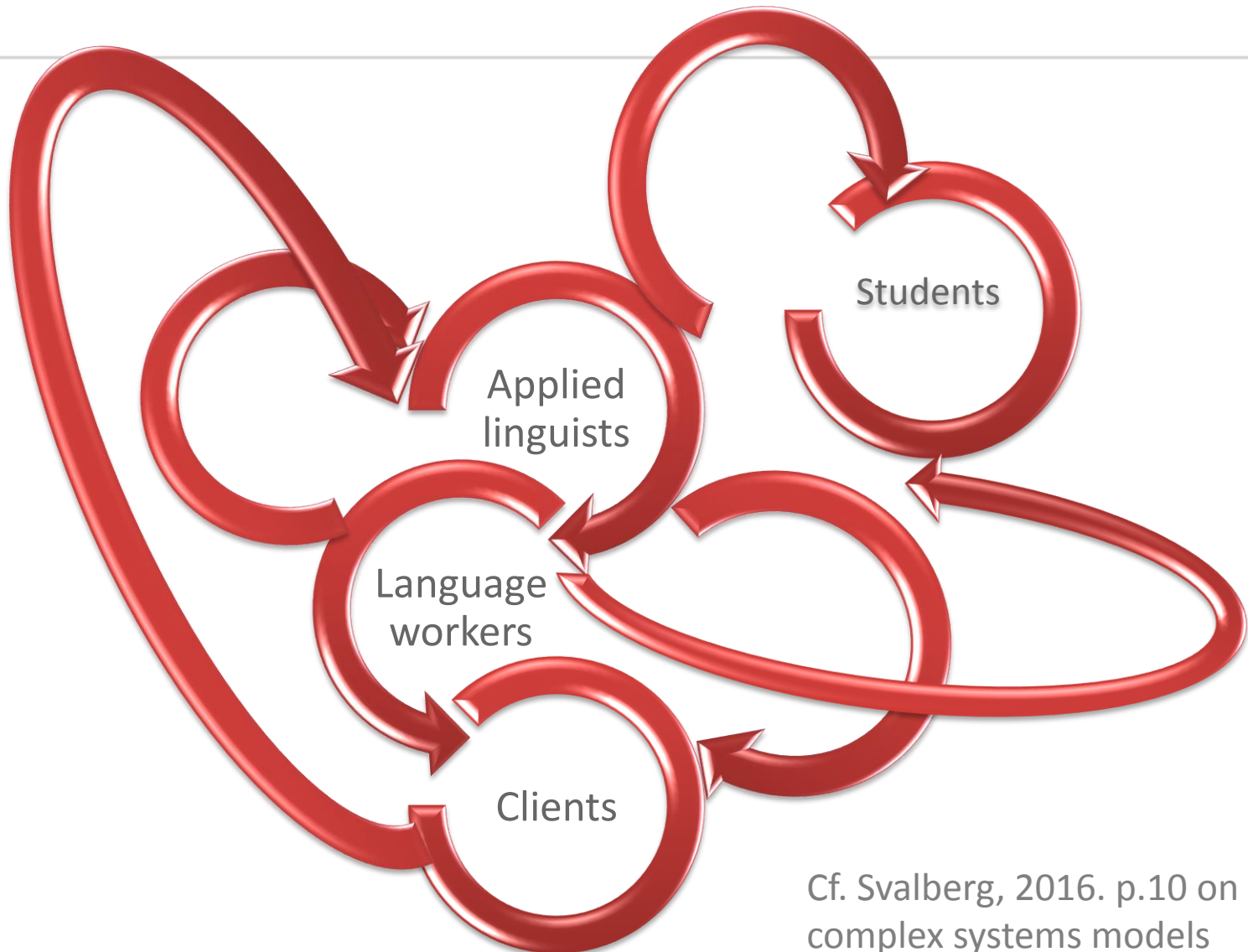
‘I think [clients] are starting to understand that language is really important ... certainly the more advanced agencies and brands are starting to realise that, but for the majority they don’t really get it yet.’ (PrS1)

‘It amazes me how linguistics is still a “secret” subject. All kinds of people assert all kinds of nonsense about language, without considering that it might be possible to design experiments to test their ill-informed prejudices!’ (PrS5)

‘Sometimes as a linguist you have to explain a lot. You have to explain the value of linguistics, especially to clients ... We educate doctors on how to better communicate ... And we help patients communicate with their doctors about their condition.’ (PrS8)

‘The task is not just to answer the question, but also to educate the lawyers, judge and jury.’ (PrS4)


Raising language awareness



Cf. Svalberg, 2016. p.10 on
complex systems models

Pause for thought:

Do applied linguists want to get involved with language work(ers)? Should they? Do they have to?



Language as a commodity

The emergence of the knowledge economy, a growing service sector and saturated markets in developed economies lead to 'an increased importance for language in

- a) **managing the flow of resources** over extended spatial relations and compressed space-time relations,
- b) **providing symbolic added value** to industrially produced resources
- c) **facilitating** the construction of and access to **niche markets**, and
- d) **developing linguistically mediated** knowledge and service **industries**' (Heller, 2010, p. 103) – and indeed language work

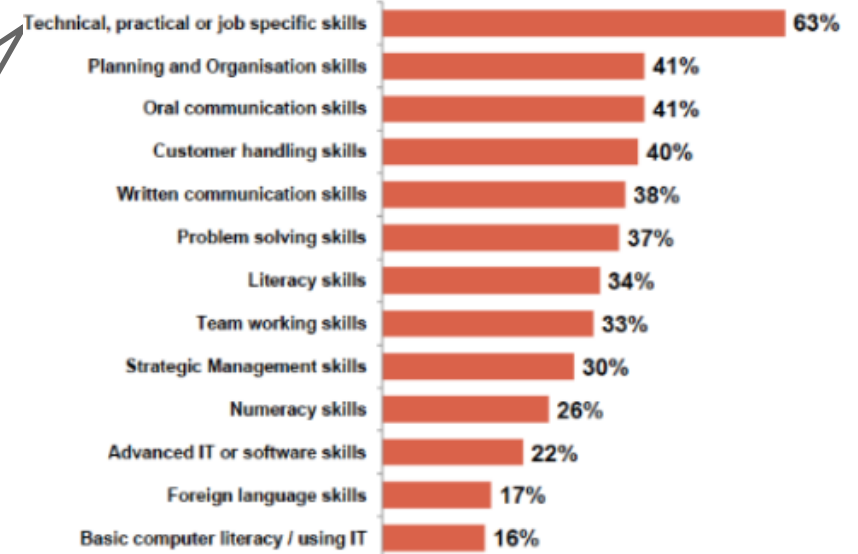
'language is understood primarily as a means of communication[, which] fits well with the instrumentalism that characterizes mainstream management theory and practice ... **linguistic instrumentalism**, which sees the usefulness of a language in terms of its economic value' (Weninger & Jan, 2013, p. 60).

Language as a commodity (bought and sold, crafted and designed) and a marketable skill.

Language as a skill

Project Management Institute(2013):
\$135 million is at risk for every US\$1 billion spent on a project. Of this sum, 56 percent (US\$75 million) is at risk due to ineffective communications.,

Development Economics (2015):
The annual overall expected loss of production due to expected soft skills deficits is anticipated to amount to almost £8.4 billion per year by 2020.



Base : All establishments with skills shortage vacancies - up to 6 occupations followed up (4,897)

l: Skills lacking in applicants (Winterbotham et al., 2014)

‘developing leadership and communication competencies should focus on promoting linguistic awareness in participants and enabling them to reflect on their own and others’ linguistic contributions ... our approach is timely in addressing recent calls to **promote reflection skills** as central to **enhancing employability.**’ (Reissner-Roubicek & Cai, 2016)

Reasons for teaching critical language awareness

‘In a critical view of education, knowledge and “skills” are indeed taught and learnt, but they are also questioned — a central concern is what counts as knowledge or skill (and therefore what does not), for whom, why, and with what beneficial or problematic consequences’. (Fairclough, 1999, p. 81)

‘in passing on prestigious practices and values ... *without* developing a critical awareness of them, one is implicitly legitimising them, and the asymmetrical distribution of cultural capital.’ (Fairclough, 1992, p. 150; original emphasis)

‘Language awareness goes a long way towards alerting individuals, organisations and social subsystems to infiltration by another, dominant subsystem, and will help to immunise them against it.’ (Mautner, 2010, p. 175)

Critical awareness at text, discourse practice and socio-economic context levels.

Who needs critical language awareness?

Critical language education has traditionally been discussed with regard to underprivileged/widening participation students. But what if students are the future elite?

‘educating **future executives** to be more critical of discourse practices must occur in tandem with raising language awareness within **all echelons of the (future) workforce.**’ (Weninger & Kan, 2013, p. 61)

‘Indeed there is a greater need to educate **white middle-class students** in critical language study which they may not otherwise feel much disposed to pursue, simply because their immediate interests are not at stake.’ (Wallace, 1999, p. 102)

‘[M]ere awareness is not enough. Learners need also to find for themselves ways of speaking and writing which **impose less** on the people they are speaking to.’ (Janks & Ivanič, 1992, p. 314)

Who wants critical language awareness?

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that learner preferences on business communication courses do **not** include critical language awareness.

Employers may wish for the benefit of such awareness for fairer workplaces, better customer communication, increased reputation etc. – for moral principles or profit motive.

Whose wishes have priority – learners', employers', teachers'?



Critical language awareness in consulting

LEWISHAM PCT COMMUNITY HEALTH SERVICES - CHILDHOOD IMMUNISATION



Lewisham Primary Care Trust
Community Health Services

MMR INFO SHEET FOR PARENTS

Measles is still a problem in Lewisham, particularly for children under the age of 2 years. Some children suffer severe complications – one in ten children who caught measles last year needed to be admitted to hospital. The children who are most likely to catch measles are those who haven't been immunised. Immunisation is very effective. There is almost no chance of side effects. Clinics are held at your GP surgery and health visitor sessions across the whole of the borough – times and places are on the back of this letter. Immunisations are given by specially trained nurses. Of course immunisation is FREE! If your child has not been immunised, you should bring them along – it's never too late.

Michael Corr, Immunisation Co-ordinator for Lewisham

What do I do if I suspect my child has measles?

Go to see your GP as soon as possible. The GP will inform the Health Protection Unit who will send a saliva kit and questionnaire to each case or parent by post. This will help us confirm the diagnosis that your child has measles. They will also give advice on what to do next and will inform you of the results of the test. It remains extremely important though that we are notified promptly of all cases of suspected measles so that confirmatory testing can be arranged. It is also important that high priority is given to ensuring that all susceptible children are offered and given two doses of MMR.

What about reports of links between autism and MMR? Is this really a risk?

No. Autism was well-known long before MMR was ever used in this country. Although autism is recognised more often now than in the past, the increases were going on long before MMR was introduced. Parents often notice signs of autism in children after their first birthday, and MMR is usually given when children are 12 to 15 months old, so it's possible to see how people might think that there is a link with MMR. But, there is no evidence, other than coincidence, to link MMR with autism.

I do not know if my 14 yr old daughter has had her second MMR jab. If she has, will it matter if she has it again?

The MMR vaccine was first introduced into the UK in 1988 for all children over one year of age. The second dose, normally given at 3-5 years of age, wasn't introduced until 1996. This means that there is a group of people in their late teens and early twenties who may have received no or only one MMR injection, so it is important that you have MMR now. If you are not sure if you ever had MMR before, then you should have one dose now and make an appointment to have a second dose in one month's time.

My child is allergic to egg. Can he have the MMR? Does the fact that he has several allergies (dairy and egg) make it more likely he will experience side effects?

Egg allergy is not a reason to either delay or not have MMR. Neither does the fact that your son has several allergies.

Although a tiny residual amount of egg protein may be found in the MMR vaccine, only if there is a confirmed anaphylactic reaction to egg-containing food, should paediatric advice be sought with a view to immunisation under controlled conditions such as admission to hospital as a day case. Your doctor or practice nurse should be able to advise you. Our recommendation is that your son should have his MMR.

If I have epilepsy and my child is due to have the MMR is there a risk that he will develop it?

Epilepsy in a first degree relative (father, mother or a brother or sister) is not a contraindication to having MMR. There is no scientific evidence to support the suggestion that your child is at a higher risk of developing epilepsy. The advice is that your child should have the MMR when it is due.

Is it better to have the MMR in one injection or is it better to have the injections separately?

It is much, much better to have MMR rather than separate injections - not least because having separate injections leaves children at risk of catching the diseases for long periods of time. Another problem with giving the vaccines separately is that your child will be getting a total of 6 jabs instead of 2. In addition the single measles and mumps vaccines which are being used are not licensed for use in this country. Every independent expert group around the world (including the World Health Organisation) supports the use of MMR, and none supports the use of single vaccines. We cannot therefore justify a course of action that does not offer the safest most effective way of protecting our children.

"Immunising children with MMR doesn't only protect them; it also reduces the risk of spreading the infection to children who cannot be immunised because of existing serious health problems such as childhood cancers. It also protects those children too young to have the vaccine."

Dr Rachel Heathcock, Consultant in communicable disease control for SE London

information leaflet on MMR
(measles, mumps, rubella)
vaccination, issued by (then)
Lewisham Primary Care Trust
distributed in paper format, c.2009

Some quasi-spoken features ('it is much,
much better to have MMR') and
solidarity ('the safest ... way of
protecting our children')

'only if there is a confirmed anaphylactic
reaction to egg-containing food, should
paediatric advice be sought with a view to
immunisation under controlled conditions
such as admission to hospital as a day case'

Critical language awareness in consulting

original:

Q: My child is allergic to egg. Can he have the MMR? Does the fact that he has several allergies (dairy and egg) make it more likely he will experience side effects?

A: Egg allergy is not a reason to either delay or not have MMR. Neither does the fact that your son has several allergies.

alternative:

A: As the parent of a child with several allergies you already have a lot to worry about. It's good news then that unless your child has had a severe reaction to egg-containing food before, the MMR jab is totally safe. So do get in touch and we'll help you set up an appointment to get your child protected.

Solving the conundrum?

But what about work for private sector clients: insurance companies, financial service providers, pharma companies etc.? Is it enough to make external discourse less discriminatory (less sexist, ageist and generally condescending) while helping clients to (ultimately) increase revenue?



Solving the conundrum?

Incidentally, linguists who help to deliver such programmes—including this author—face quite a dilemma. On the one hand, it is because of their academic background and linguistic expertise that they are in a better position than many a self-styled communications trainer to develop balanced and analytically sound training modules which avoid a grossly oversimplifying transfer of “customer orientation” from the private sector to higher education. On the other hand, it is this very background and expertise that makes linguists—again, like this author—the most ardent critics of importing commercial concepts and discourses into academia. The dilemma can be resolved by opting for a constructively critical approach which puts language awareness centre stage and shows trainees how linguistic resources can be deployed to convey courtesy, empathy and professionalism without mimicking the customer-service discourse of the commercial sector.

Mautner 2010, p. 184, n.15

‘[Critical language awareness] ... helps people to **conform with open eyes**, to identify their feelings about it, and to recognise the compromises they are making.’ (Janks & Ivanič, 1992, p. 318)

Thank you for your attention

Vielen Dank für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit

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