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Language and Interdisciplinarity

This is an informal paper that I hope will promote discussion about the epistemology of knowledge production through interdisciplinary research. My observations are largely based on my experience at a research council, and I believe that interdisciplinary research is fruitful for finding previously overlooked areas where we can enhance human knowledge and understanding.

The world of human knowledge is a bit like the global economy: although one would like to see continuous quantitative annual growth of 5%, one can see that *in principle* this is unsustainable, so one should also be looking for qualitative improvements in the type and distribution of wealth. Likewise with knowledge production: although we continuously aspire to enhance the quantity of human knowledge through "research-into x and y", there are clearly many aspects of human life and experience that have already fallen between disciplinary boundaries, such as the causes of conflict, poverty, inequality, etc. Here, perhaps, are opportunities for doing research differently – for doing "research-between x and y".

One of the immediate challenges of such interdisciplinary research is to find an appropriate voice. This consists of both a language and an intellectual perspective from which to deploy it. Both of these are likely to demand modifications to our existing language and points of view. For example, in the area of language, we can witness an extension and use or misuse of existing vocabulary in response to new ideas and ways of thinking. Kuhn claims "*Clearly we need a new vocabulary and concepts for analysing events like the discovery of oxygen*" (1 p.55) (my emphasis). This is my first point: that the vocabulary or signifying potential of our current language needs to change in order to explain the new.

We also feel a challenge when people speak about, for example, "critical theory" or "political correctness". We are discomfited when certain words begin to bring with them new, or newly highlighted, connotations that make the previously-acceptable

unacceptable to some parts of society. This is not just the ordinary evolution of language over time, but a change in understanding of what that language is saying. This is my second point: that perspectives on existing knowledge (i.e., meanings) also undergo change.

The birth of a new concept is invariably foreshadowed by a more or less, strained or extended use of old linguistic material; the concept does not attain to individual and independent life, until it has found a distinctive linguistic embodiment" (2 p.16).

This is not just the politicisation of certain terms which were perhaps not hitherto recognised for their political potential, but also changes to apparently politically-neutral scientific terms in the knowledge paradigm, as acknowledged by Kuhn (ibid p.85).

At the margins of discipline-specific fields, one can find collaboration and appropriation in which boundaries dissolve and new disciplinary identities emerge. For example, sociology as we now understand it (the scientific study of society) was not recognised as an academic field of study before the end of the nineteenth century. Fields themselves jostle for position in the knowledge landscape (3) and identify themselves as cultures and subcultures through their use of language and terminology (4). A useful, more recent example, that can now be seen clearly owing to an emerging body of interdisciplinary research, is STS (the social study of science) (5), in which scientific discovery is located within a societal context that prioritises certain investigations over others (cf. my observation above about conflict, poverty, and inequality).

In the context of research funding, the applicant must make a case for the necessity and benefit of the proposed research. This means mobilising existing

1. Kuhn T. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd edition, enlarged. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press; 1962.

2. Sapir E. *Language: an introduction to the study of speech*. New York: Harcourt Brace; 1921.

3. Foucault M. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock Press; 1974.

4. Lyotard JF. *The Postmodern Condition: a report on knowledge*. Manchester: Man. Univ. Press; 2005.

5. Merton RK. *The Sociology of Science: theoretical and empirical investigations*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press; 1974.

language and existing disciplinary concepts in order to gain a point of view from which to identify a gap in knowledge. In addition, it demands that approaches, techniques, and methods are identified to address that gap, i.e., not that it is perceived simply as a void, but that indicators already exist of potential content in that apparent void. So how does one identify this potential from afar, from the position of initially being stuck within disciplinary silos and language? This is where I propose a structural description of what is happening. One needs to describe the territory in terms of the pieces of the jigsaw that we already have and describe it in ways that reveal the gaps – the missing pieces of the jigsaw. The content of the field being described – the picture on the jigsaw – is still unclear, but even if we have the pieces upside down, we can tell whether we have all the pieces or there are pieces missing.

Until the interdisciplinary proposal came along, we assumed our intellectual worldview was complete – the interdisciplinary researcher is a disruptor, who opens our eyes to another way of arranging the pieces in which there are gaps rather than completeness. This is partly where the intellectual discomfort and negative reaction arises. The new perspective is often rejected by those who are still satisfied with the original way of describing the world. The new point of view rearranges concepts to reveal that there is dissatisfaction, there is hurt, there is an inadequacy that the new politically-preferable vocabulary can

address. This is not simply restricted to sociology or humanities disciplines; in the sciences, paradigm shifts expose of ways of thinking and propose new, but difficult to describe, perspectives. These linguistic limitations are much more profound than simply the need for additional technical vocabulary. These are structural features that make it difficult to adopt and express the new point of view from which the problem becomes clearly visible (6). Some objectors will say it is difficult to describe because it is insignificant or lacking merit, but until we explore the territory, we are not going to know whether it is significant or not. Interdisciplinary researchers are therefore, first and foremost, pioneers in a new explanatory framework, who need to gain the attention of those who remain in their disciplinary comfort zones. Such researchers are disruptors of this comfort, but for that very reason we should try to listen through their unfamiliar voices to the recognisable structures within.



6. Biggs MAR. Speaking, Writing, and Thinking: linguistic relativity and research. In: Pérez-Aldeguer S, editor. Teaching and Learning Projects in Arts and Humanities. Madrid: Adaya Press; 2023: 1-12. URL: <https://www.adayapress.com/ad23864146/> [accessed 6 Nov 2023]





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