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Christian Langerfeld & Gisle Andersen

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## Focus on Text Producers: Plain and Easy Language in the Swiss Multilingual Institutional Context

*Paolo Canavese, Annarita Felici & Cornelia Griebel*

**Abstract** This paper is part of the MACSI project (Multilingual Accessible Communication in Swiss Institutions) and focuses on a case study carried out with the Federal Statistical Office (FSO). The broad aim of this collaboration with the FSO is to evaluate how multilingual accessible communication on statistics can be produced. While most of the research on accessible communication is text- and recipient-based, in this study we focused on text producers. Like writers, who are specialized experts in different domains, translators are also presented with the challenge of interlinguistic transfer when it comes to both plain and specialized texts. This paper presents the results from a questionnaire on accessibility submitted to writers and translators within the FSO. The responses show that writers either address several target groups with the same text or produce a variety of texts for different target groups. Moreover, both writers and translators have little knowledge or experience with plain and easy language, even though most of them are interested in writing more lay-friendly texts. There is therefore a need to train and raise awareness among writers and translators so that they are able to adapt content, level of technicality and language to different levels of expertise when producing a variety of multilingual, accessible texts.

**Keywords** accessibility, easy-to-understand, expert-lay communication, institutional communication, multilingual communication, plain language, text producers

### 1 Introduction: easy-to-understand in the institutional context

The last twenty years have given rise to several initiatives around the world aimed at accessible communication (e. g., the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006; the Directive (EU) 2016/2102 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications)<sup>1</sup>, that is, communicating in such a manner that as many people as possible can understand what is being communicated. As Hirvonen/Kinnunen (2020: 470) point out, “[a]ccessibility has various dimensions, from overcoming physical, linguistic, and social barriers to coping with sensory and communicative impairments”. The aforementioned EU directive, for instance, has a strong focus on the technical side of accessibility for disabled people. This paper will focus on linguistic accessibility for the general public and will not account for all aspects of accessibility in the field of institutional communication (cf. also Maaß/Rink 2019b for a comprehensive model of accessible communication).

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hrbodies/crpd/pages/conventionrightspersonswithdisabilities.aspx> and <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32016L2102>, respectively (20.01.2022).

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The idea of increasing audience access to written texts is rooted in the *plain language* movement, which gained particular strength in the 1970s and is aimed at bridging the gap between institutions and common citizens (Kimble 1992, Garner 2001, Macdonald 2004).<sup>2</sup> According to the International Plain Language Federation, a “communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.”<sup>3</sup>

However, nowadays, the notion of linguistic accessibility encompasses various simplified varieties of natural language that can be placed on a continuum between *plain language*, aimed at common citizens, and *easy language*, which primarily targets people with communication impairments and disabilities (Bredel/Maaß 2016, Bock 2019, Maaß 2020). As Lindholm/Vanhatalo (2021: 18) put it, “whereas *Plain Language* is related to institutional documents, and aims to simplify legal language for non-professionals, the notion of *Easy Language* refers to making various texts or speech accessible to people who have difficulties reading and understanding standard language”.

If *plain language* aims at writing specialized content in a clear, concise and organized way that is suitable for the intended audience, *easy language* involves an extra level of simplification and necessitates extensive text and content reduction for people with enhanced communication needs. Despite the difficulties of addressing such a broad target group, *easy language* has recently spread to many institutional environments across Europe, from healthcare to media and public administration.<sup>4</sup> The countless initiatives and activities, both at the institutional level and in academia (e. g., Inclusion Europe, EASIT,<sup>5</sup> the International Federation of Library Associations – IFLA Guidelines) have simultaneously given rise to a plethora of terms like *easy language*, *easy-to-read-language*, *easy-to-understand-language*, *easy read*, *simplified language*, *simple language*, and *barrier-free-communication*, each of which is well-grounded (Lindholm/Vanhatalo 2021, Perego 2021), but no less confusing.<sup>6</sup> For the sake of clarity, we will use “easy-to-understand” (E2U) as an umbrella term for texts that include both plain and easy language in the wake of EASIT (2019) and Perego (2020: 236). We will also use “clarity” as a synonym (cf. for instance the edited volume by Wagner/Cacciaguidi-Fahy 2008, entitled *Obscurity and Clarity in the Law*).

From an academic point of view, research on linguistic accessibility developed at the beginning of the 20th century with the first investigations into readability (François 2015: 80 f.). In the 1970s and 1980s the focus shifted to comprehensibility (cf. e. g., Langer/Schulz von Thun/Tausch 1974, Groeben 1982). While empirical investigations of comprehensibility always involve text-reader interaction, i. e., comprehension tests with groups of people (Christmann/

<sup>2</sup> Cf. also <https://www.plainlanguage.gov> and <https://plainlanguagenetwork.org/> (14.02.2022).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. <https://www.iplfederation.org/plain-language/> (20.01.2022). Cf. also <http://www.plainlanguage.gov/howto/guidelines/FederalPLGuidelines/FederalPLGuidelines.pdf> (18.10.2022).

<sup>4</sup> In Germany, for example, it is now mandatory for all Federal websites, as provided for by the Barrierefreie-Informationstechnik-Verordnung BITV 2.0 (2011) [https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bitv\\_2\\_0/BJNR184300011.html](https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/bitv_2_0/BJNR184300011.html) (14.02.2022).

<sup>5</sup> EASIT (Easy Access for Social Inclusion Training) is an Erasmus funded project that aims to provide training material in easy-to-read language and single out new professional profiles. Cf. <https://transmedia.catalonia.uab.cat/easit/> (20.01.2022).

<sup>6</sup> Hansen-Schirra et al. (2021) have recently attempted to standardize terminology related to accessible communication in English and German, and establish clear definitions for both languages.

Groeben 2019) or even refined laboratory testing methods like eye-tracking (e. g., Maksymski/Gutermuth/Hansen-Schirra 2015), readability indices are based exclusively on mathematical formulae. They account for text parameters like sentence and word length, and are typically matched with the estimated level of education required to be able to read and comprehend a text without difficulty. The main criticism against traditional readability formulae is that they do not adequately capture all facets of text complexity (e. g., Lutz 2015). However, recent computational developments have fostered research on readability metrics, thus going beyond basic readability formulae; the new frontier in readability research is the so-called “AI readability” (François 2015), which makes use of machine-learning algorithms to predict the level of complexity of a text.

In this paper, instead of dealing with texts and their recipients, we focused on text producers and, more specifically, writers and translators. While plain-language producers “are mostly domain experts that are given the additional task of writing in a comprehensible way”, easy language texts are usually “written or translated by easy language experts” (Maaß 2020: 180). This means that domain experts are largely untrained or barely trained in accessible writing and often have no direct contact with their target groups (Maaß 2020: 181). On this point, Krings (1996) shows that the intuition of domain experts can be deceptive when it comes to producing plain language texts. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that they sometimes have to sacrifice precision to adapt content for a lay audience or target groups with special needs.

Previous studies on text-producers in communication from governmental organisations focus on the skills required for plain communication in regulatory organisations (Skopal 2022), the production of client-friendly insurance notices (Fiedler-Rauer/Margies 2021) and design, production and cooperation processes (Martin/Gregor/Rice 2008, Jenkins 2011, Gotti 2018). In a case study on governmental organisations, Skopal (2022) investigates the writing processes by triangulating data from interviews with writers, testing readability with users and analysing text. Although the text-producers were writing for an intended readership, the reader-participant analysis revealed that less than half of the texts were easily accessible (Skopal 2022: 201). Like in the present study, these text producers are essentially domain experts who do not have a background in languages. In the conclusion of her analysis of competencies and skillsets, the author asks how “staff view their role as a writer” (Skopal 2022: 200), but leaves the question unanswered.

In this study, we tried to close this gap by zooming in on the perspective of expert writers who are called on to produce primarily plain, but also, in part, easy language texts in the Swiss institutional context. We focused on the attitude of domain experts towards more accessible informative texts, as this is an important factor when it comes to motivating change in text production processes and producing texts for a lay audience.

More specifically, this paper is part of the MACSI project (Multilingual Accessible Communication in Swiss Institutions)<sup>7</sup> and focuses on a case study carried out with the Federal Statistical Office (FSO). The broad aim of this collaboration with the FSO is to evaluate different ways of implementing multilingual accessible information on statistics.<sup>8</sup> Text producers

<sup>7</sup> Cf. <https://www.researchgate.net/project/MACSI-Multilingual-Accessible-Communication-in-Swiss-institutions> (20.01.2022).

<sup>8</sup> The collaboration consists of three main stages, i. e., collecting background information and defining the goals in terms of accessible communication, sensitizing text producers and assisting them in the production of their first E2U texts and evaluating the outcomes with target reader populations. In this

at the FSO include both writers and translators. The writers are experts in different domains and work either in the central Publishing and Communication Division or specialized units (e. g., Population and Education, Health and Social Affairs, Territory and Environment, etc.). They deal with the production of both specialized and popularized texts for different audiences. Translators work in the Language Services and translate all kind of texts produced within the FSO, thus facing the challenges of interlinguistic transfer in both specialized and plain communication. We will use the term “text producers” to refer to both writers and translators.

To assist with implementing multilingual E2U communication at the FSO, we decided to directly involve writers and translators by inviting them to preliminary interviews and a larger-scale, structured survey. As per Saldanha/O’Brien (2014: 152), “[a] questionnaire may be used to collect background information on research participants; to collect data on facts, opinions, attitudes, behaviour, etc. or to combine the collection of both”. We will refer to these types of information as “profile” and “stance”, respectively.

We explored three main questions:

- 1) To what extent is accessible communication a concern among domain experts who are producing texts for various peers and lay audiences?
- 2) What are the opinions on E2U and experiences of text producers at the FSO?
- 3) For text producers, what are the main shortcomings and difficulties when it comes to producing accessible texts?

The results from this case study are arguably valid for other institutional settings. Indeed, it is essential to work with the people in charge of text production and raise awareness on good writing practices in order to foster a culture of accessibility.

This paper is structured as follows: in section 2, we provide more information on the Swiss institutional context in general and on the FSO in particular; to answer our research questions, we adopted a multi-methodological approach that is described in section 3; section 4 analyzes the results from the questionnaire submitted to writers and translators within the FSO; and, finally, our conclusions and new avenues for future research are presented in section 5.

## 2 A case study at the Swiss Federal Statistical Office (FSO)

The idea of writing plain institutional texts is not new in Switzerland. It is deep-rooted, above all, in legal drafting, where the ideal of a *popular legislation* for lay citizens dates back to the drafting of the Civil Code at the beginning of the 20th century (Huber 1914). This principle has survived until present day and has recently been enshrined in the law; civil servants should not only strive for clarity but should also receive appropriate training.<sup>9</sup> Over the last few decades, the Confederation has taken several initiatives to ensure quality in institutional texts, such as guidelines, seminars and organizational efforts (Canavese 2020: 26–29). However, when it comes to administrative texts on specialized subject matters, further efforts still need to be

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paper, we present the results from the first stage, which has already been completed; publications on results from the other stages are either available (cf. Felici et al. 2023, forthcoming, which presents some results from the second stage) or planned.

<sup>9</sup> Art. 7 of the Languages Act, <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2009/821/en>; Art. 2 Languages ordinance, <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/2010/355/en> (04.02.2022).

undertaken to ensure accessibility, as shown in recent studies on information leaflets for old age insurance and disability insurance (Felici/Griebel 2019, Griebel/Felici 2021).

This led to the creation of the aforementioned MACSI project, which aims to strengthen the exchanges between academia and institutions, and foster accessible communication for the general public. Since Switzerland is a multilingual country, accessible communication is mandatory at an institutional level in all its official languages (German, French and Italian),<sup>10</sup> thus giving rise to a particular demand for drafting and translation. Consequently, when dealing with plain and easy language, we have to take into account not only intralingual, but also interlingual translation.

Our partner, the FSO, makes for an interesting case study: i) it has a large and complex structure, ii) it deals with a variety of specialized domains, and iii) it addresses different stakeholders ranging from politicians to media, economists and the general public. As it is the official national center for Swiss statistics, it surveys and describes the status and development of almost every aspect of the Confederation, including population, economy, society, environment, culture and education. The FSO thus provides both raw statistical data and specialized communications aimed at an expert audience and the general public. The variety of texts mirrors the heterogeneity of its recipients and ranges from technical reports and complex statistics to surveys, press releases, e-mails, news, popularized reports and statistics, social media posts, websites and informative brochures, thus constantly shifting from experts to laypersons with different knowledge and educational backgrounds.

Most of this statistical information is used to orient key political areas of Swiss life and society and provide objective figures for public debate, thus promoting fair governance and democracy. Implementing accessible communication is therefore paramount at the FSO, since official statistics “have the mandate of compiling and imparting user-friendly information on important areas of life” and society.<sup>11</sup> The technicality of the topics may appear to be a deterrent for E2U communication, but the FSO also deals with a variety of non-expert target groups. The general public often comes into play through surveys, censuses and mainstream information on the country’s development; media and journalists rely on statistics for news and events; schools often visit the FSO; and every year, the FSO publishes *Statistical Data on Switzerland*, an informative publication aimed at the general public.<sup>12</sup>

Based on Hoffmann’s LSP model (1985), communication at the FSO encompasses several levels of technicality. Hoffmann refers primarily to the technological domain, but also transfers the model to other areas of communication. He defines five levels of technicality with a

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<sup>10</sup> The fourth national language, Romansh, “is also an official language of the Confederation when communicating with persons who speak Romansh” (Art. 70, Para. 1 of the Federal Constitution of the Swiss Confederation, <https://www.fedlex.admin.ch/eli/cc/1999/404/en> (11.08.2022)). However, Romansh is greatly underrepresented in institutional writing.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the webpage “Official statistics” on the FSO website: <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/fso/official-statistics.html> (20.01.2022).

<sup>12</sup> The publication is freely available on the FSO’s website. The download page stresses the importance of statistics to describe our society: “Statistics speak volumes about society: what is interesting is not the figures specifically but the messages they convey on the state of society as well as relations between individuals both within and outside of Switzerland.” <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/catalogues-databases/publications/overviews/statistical-data-switzerland.assetdetail.15864467.html> (20.01.2022).



decreasing degree of abstraction, from A (highest level of abstraction, use of artificial symbols and mathematical formulae) to E (very low level of abstraction and technicality). Finally, he assigns corresponding groups of communication participants to these levels, which, in turn, have a decreasing degree of expertise, from A (scientist to scientist) to E (experts to laypersons and vice versa). FSO publications are aimed at participants with different levels of expertise, including the lowest level, and writers need to take into account these different degrees of knowledge.

Given that the FSO is meant to communicate in its three official languages and English, offering information in plain and easy language means reflecting closely on text production and, even more importantly, the interplay between writing and translation. It is only possible to produce multilingual E2U texts by collaborating with writers, who are field experts and can provide explanations on specialized topics, as well as feedback on content selection, reduction and terms.

### 3 Methodology

The aim of this study was to bring to light the difficulties of producing texts for a wider audience at the FSO, as well as to identify potential solutions together with participants. Given our focus on text-producers, we started with interviews and focus group discussions with communication management staff, writers and translators to gain an initial, broad understanding of important aspects of text production and translation processes. It allowed us to gain direct access to our partners' thoughts and opinions, without worrying about gathering representative samples. Due to time constraints (both ours and our partner's) and the variety of participants and their availability, we did not consider other approaches, such as the ethnographic one.

To answer the research questions presented in the introduction (section 1), we relied on distinctly qualitative approaches (Silverman 2017) with an exploratory sequential design (Creswell 2015: 41):



Figure 1: Research design

Between December 2020 and May 2021, we carried out three explorative interviews with staff in charge of the Publishing unit and two focus group discussions, which included writers and translators. More precisely, we began by discussing E2U communication with our main project partner, the Head of the Dissemination and Publishing section within the Communication and Publishing unit. The interviews were unstructured in order to explore the perspective of our partners and better grasp their potential needs, in terms of clear communication at the FSO. We then organized two focus group discussions with text writers and translators from the same unit. We began the meetings by presenting some linguistic/textual analyses we carried out on selected pages of *Statistical Data on Switzerland*. Together with our main partner, we selected some specific sections and analyzed them according to the general and language-specific standards of plain language (cf., for instance, Cutts 2013 for English; Baumert 2016 and Schubert 2013 for German; Ministère fédéral de la Fonction publique de Belgique 2015 for French; Cortelazzo/Pellegrino 2003 for Italian). During the presentation, we pointed out relevant aspects from an accessibility perspective. This was then followed by an unstruc-

tured discussion on these aspects within the focus group. The interviews and focus groups were recorded and the content of the discussions were summarized. We used the questions as analytical categories to aggregate individual responses and identify frequent and relevant topics for the survey.

Based on the knowledge we acquired, we performed four semi-structured interviews with another four writers from the communication/publishing department. The results from these interviews were also summarized and formed the basis of a questionnaire that was distributed on a larger scale.

After this exploratory phase, we developed two questionnaires using the LimeSurvey online platform: one for writers and a second, with slightly different questions, for translators (cf. Annex 1). The questionnaire consisted of three groups of questions on the background and current position of respondents, their usual writing and/or translation activities at the FSO and their stances on accessibility. More specifically, it contained both close-ended and open-ended questions on target audiences (experts and/or laypersons), writing processes, language of writing (mother tongue or other language/s), their experiences with E2U and their attitude toward writing accessible texts within the thematic and specialized framework of the FSO.

The questionnaire was administered to 60 participants, 48 writers and 12 translators. The sample was created by our main project partners, who only included employees who are actually in charge of writing texts. This helped us avoid unqualified responses, which would have distorted the outcomes of the survey. As far as the translation unit is concerned, no selection was necessary, as translators deal with text production on a daily basis due to the nature of their work. The whole translation unit was therefore invited to take part in the survey. Participation was on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Although we asked questions about their background and experiences, as well as personal and professional opinions, we analyzed the responses in an aggregate manner, so as to make it impossible to trace back answers to the respondent.

We sent out the questionnaire in July 2021 and respondents had 15 days to complete it. A reminder was then sent out, giving them another 15 days to fill it out. We were able to collect a total of 33 responses, which correspond to a participation rate of 55 %. Despite the high level of participation, it is also worth probing the reasons behind incomplete responses (N = 13) and non-responses (N = 14). One simple explanation may be that the questionnaire took place during the holiday season and participants had a high workload during that period. Nevertheless, another possible interpretation may be that there is little awareness on the issue of accessibility, and thus, little interest in participating.

Finally, we organized a one-day workshop with 20 writers and translators in September 2021. The morning period was devoted to various presentations that were accompanied by discussions. First, we introduced the results of the questionnaire, then we presented the different pillars and rules of plain language and accessible communication. Finally, we discussed the above-mentioned linguistic analyses. During the afternoon section, participants were divided into three groups (German-speakers, French-speakers and a bilingual French/German group, where participants were allowed to speak the language of their choice) and given a hands-on exercise using different texts they brought in themselves. This exercise, along with a final discussion with the whole group, was particularly helpful from a research perspective, because it helped us understand the main difficulties encountered by writers when trying to simplify their texts and shed light on further training needs. A year later (November 2022), we organized a second hands-on workshop.

## 4 Text producers to the fore: a focus on writers and translators

This section presents the main findings from the online questionnaire along three main axes: 1) writing and translating at the FSO, 2) knowledge of E2U communication and 3) stances towards E2U. After conducting a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2016), we summarized the answers to the open-ended questions significantly and tried to indicate the proportion of participants that expressed an opinion through the use of quantifying adverbs (“all, few, some respondents indicated that ...”). The answers to the closed-ended questions were aggregated and analyzed quantitatively to calculate percentages.

### 4.1 *Writing and translating*

This section reports on our first axe – the profiles of writers and translators – and delves into their activities within the FSO. Information on their educational and professional background allowed us to learn about their writing-related activities within the FSO, the most frequent types of texts they deal with, their awareness of target readers and the potential degrees of simplification they consequently should aim for.

#### *Writer and translator profiles*

The first finding from the survey is that the writers are mostly domain experts who write, revise and edit texts. They all have a tertiary-level education and most of them hold a university degree (BA, MA and/or PhD). Based on their specialization, writers deal with data from different areas, such as formal, natural, social and human sciences. Only a few writers have a degree in a language- or communication-related field (public relations, communication, language and literature, German studies). Most of them hold a degree in other disciplines where language training is not essential (statistics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, geology, agricultural engineering, economics, history of economics, political science, political economy, geography, archaeology, sociology, psychology, criminology).

Some of the respondents currently work in the fields of communication, publishing, dissemination and media, while others work in specialized domains and draft texts on their subject matters for different target readers. Writers are at the frontline when it comes to creating plain language content. In light of this, this first result confirms that plain language producers are mostly untrained domain experts and having to communicate in accessible language gives them with yet another task (cf. Maaß’ 2020 take on this in section 1).

As far as translators are concerned, most of the respondents have a BA and/or MA degree in translation, or have completed language-related studies, such as German or Romance studies.

#### *Time devoted to writing*

As shown in Figure 2, the time that writers devote to writing full texts is extremely heterogeneous. For many respondents, writing texts is merely a collateral activity, but more than 50 % write texts on a regular basis (at least once a week to every day):

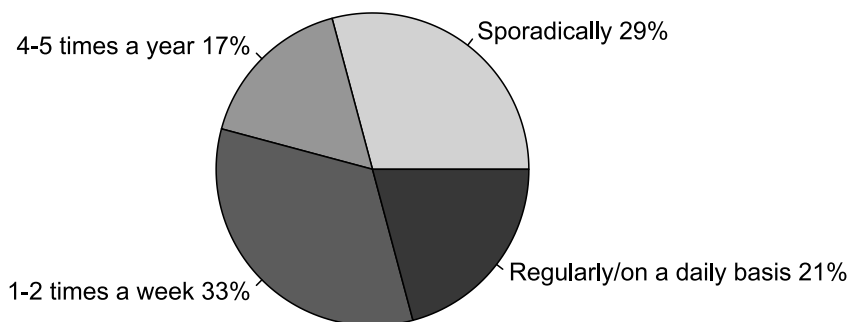


Figure 2: Time devoted to writing full texts

Besides pure writing, writers carry out several side activities like proofreading, verifying translations (in one case, even translating), assessing publications, answering internal queries (from clients) and external queries (from journalists, academics and the general public), communicating with data deliverers and consulting. They also deal with more technical activities, such as analysing data, creating thematic maps, tables, graphs and statistics, conducting surveys and programming. Many of these additional activities include some form of text work, like writing questions for surveys or inserting textual elements in graphs. This means that even writers who are less involved in text production are likely to be confronted on a daily basis with a writing task that includes issues of linguistic accessibility. Furthermore, some of the respondents are in charge of a team and project management, and carry out clerical and organizational tasks. The fact that writers do not necessarily have a linguistic background and/or training, and that some of them only deal sporadically with text production, may represent a barrier when it comes to implementing E2U.

### Text types

Writers produce (and translators translate) a wide range of texts, many of which seem to be addressed to a somewhat non-specialized target audience. Below, we list the different text types mentioned by respondents and interviewees and try to display them on an imaginary continuum ranging from the general public to domain experts:

- popularization of texts dealing with statistics (e. g., *Statistical Data on Switzerland*, cf. footnote 12)
- survey manuals
- publications about surveys
- web texts
- social media posts
- summaries for statistical portal
- press releases
- e-mails
- news mails
- staff-related publications (job advertisements, job references)
- short texts (titles, legends, explanations of visual elements)
- texts and employee magazine

- internal working papers
- legal documents
- description of results
- Statistical Yearbook<sup>13</sup>
- technical reports

#### *Target readers*

Both writers and translators are aware that their texts are addressed to a wide range of target readers. One interviewee classified the different target readers in three main categories:

- *general readers*: laypersons interested in statistical information, schools, survey participants;
- *users*: journalists with a specialized background, students, researchers, public authorities, politicians, colleagues;
- *experts*: statisticians, field experts.

These categories reflect different levels of technicality and expertise under Hoffmann's model (1985), as mentioned in section 2, and require varying degrees of simplification. The first category is clearly the one most concerned by E2U content, but it is still quite heterogeneous. Furthermore, when it comes to readership, some translators pointed out that when they receive an assignment, it is not always clear who the target reader is and some of them take it upon themselves to ask the writer to specify who the text is for.

#### *Writing and clarity*

Most writers consider the texts written at the FSO to be accessible for their intended audience. Some of them added that they make an effort to adopt clear language in texts for the general public, as highlighted by one respondent: "We deliberately formulate our texts in a much simpler way than typical scientific texts." (Writer\_11)<sup>14</sup> At the same time, many of them recognize that specialized texts are written for field experts and are consequently more complex, both from a content and linguistic point of view. Only a few respondents pointed out that, in some cases, texts can be further simplified.

#### *Translation and clarity*

Translators generally agree that highly specialized texts cannot be made accessible for the general public and, all in all, they believe that some texts are already accessible to the lay reader. When translating, they sometimes encounter difficulties that can be perceived by lay readers as well. Comprehension is sometimes hindered by highly specialized content, terminology and complex formulations. Their remarks mainly concerned the quality of the source text, which is often poor, not only at the word and sentence level, but also in terms of information structure and message cohesion. Sometimes texts are also too long and detailed, due to repetitions and the use of many figures. When moving from the product to the process, translators admitted that frequent modifications to the source text make their task more difficult.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/en/home/statistics/catalogues-databases/publications/overviews/statistical-yearbook-switzerland.html> (25.10.2022).

<sup>14</sup> In this paper, we have translated all citations from interviews or the questionnaire into English. The original citation is provided in a footnote. Here: "Unsere Texte sind bewusst deutlich einfacher formuliert als typischerweise wissenschaftliche Texte."

As a result of these shortcomings, they try to reformulate texts to improve clarity without sacrificing precision. To do so, they move away from the source text by trying to convey the same content using the most natural and comprehensible structures in the target language. More specifically, they shorten and paraphrase long, convoluted sentences, avoid repetition and reorganize the content in a more logical order. Whenever possible, they also discuss issues with the authors; they sometimes ask for clarifications, or point out mistakes or unclear sentences that need to be rectified in the source text. These reflections seem to confirm the hypothesis that multilingualism and translation can be an ally to clarity in institutional communication (Egger 2012: 430, Canavese 2022). At the same time, their freedom to improve the text is limited: translators are not allowed to fully rethink or transcreate the text (cf. Díaz-Millón/Olvera-Lobo 2021 on the notion of “transcreation”), as the different language versions need to display a high degree of parallelism and equivalence, in terms of structure and content.

#### *4.2 Knowledge of E2U communication*

After profiling the text producers and understanding the context of production, the interest of the survey gradually shifted to more accessibility-related questions. In particular, we wanted to understand what the level of knowledge of E2U is and to what extent it is a concern for each respondent and their team.

##### *Definition of plain and easy language*

The easiest way to survey knowledge of E2U consisted of asking participants to define the concepts of “plain language” and “easy language” in their own words. Only a few writers admitted that they are not familiar with these concepts. The vast majority of respondents, both writers and translators, correctly identified some features of E2U languages. For instance, they identified the main target readers of E2U, including the general public, people with poor language knowledge, people without a higher education, people with reading or learning disabilities or cognitive impairments and L2 speakers. They also touched upon linguistic features that characterize E2U varieties, for instance, conciseness, simple formulations, avoidance of jargon, specialized terms, foreign words, acronyms, use of everyday vocabulary, reduction of subordination and passive voice, as well as maximal explicitness. Finally, they recognized that layout is also a key element of E2U and that simplifying means both reducing content to create short texts and adding explanations of difficult concepts and terms. With the exception of one respondent, however, participants were unable to make a distinction between plain and easy language. This shows that both writers and translators have some degree of awareness of accessible communication, but more training is needed to refine their understanding of different language varieties for different readerships. This lack of awareness on plain and easy language is once again in line with Maaß (2020: 180 f.); it is rare for writers to receive systematic and in-depth training in this area, even when they are at the frontline of accessible text production.

##### *Discussions about accessibility*

We asked participants whether they had already discussed accessibility in their unit. More than half of both writers and translators responded positively, as shown below (Figure 3):

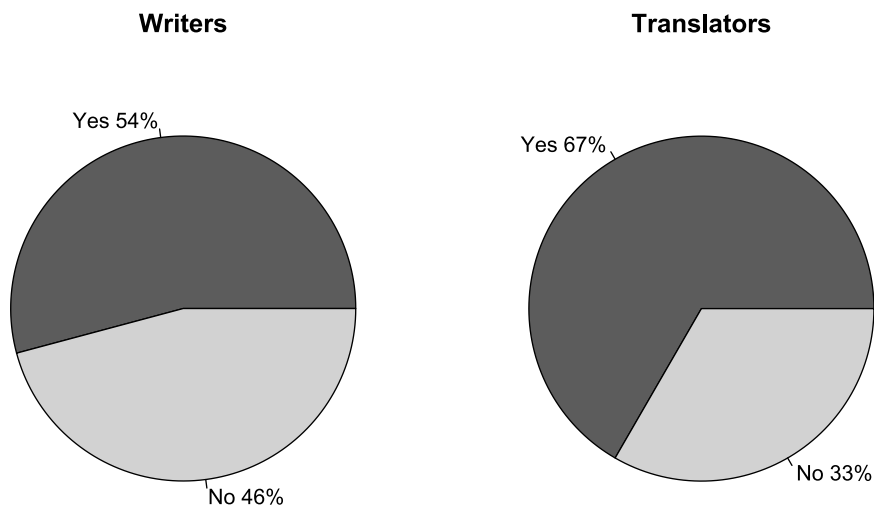


Figure 3: Previous discussions on accessibility

Nevertheless, writers specified that they had focused on technical aspects of accessibility (especially web accessibility), for instance, how to make content suitable for screen-readers, reach blind and partially-sighted users, describe visual content or carefully choose file formats, colors for diagrams and font size. This type of accessibility falls within the scope of the provisions of the EU Accessibility Directive mentioned in section 1, but there were only a few unstructured reflections related to E2U language. For example, one respondent explained that their team tried to identify the most suitable means of communication for the intended target audiences and they reflected on content selection. The same respondent also pointed to the inverted-pyramid model of content presentation (important information first, followed by details), the importance of creating good summaries, the necessity of accompanying readers with consistent web pages, glossaries, abbreviation lists and graphs along with examples. At the crossroad between content and language, one respondent highlighted the need to simplify sentences and avoiding complex calculations and models in texts intended for a broad audience. However, some respondents admitted that linguistic accessibility is still not their main concern; language simplification is carried out in a mostly intuitive way, without any clear model or guidelines. As put forward in section 1, drawing on Krings (1996), intuition is not always sufficient or appropriate when simplifying a text – at least not when proper training is absent.

As expected, accessibility had also been discussed in the translation unit, especially in terms of easy language. However, as of now, creating E2U texts is not considered to be a duty for the translation unit. One respondent admitted that the translation unit had already discussed potential training in this field. Unlike writers, linguistic accessibility seems to be crucial for most translators, in view of promoting political participation in direct democracy. Nevertheless, a lack of time and resources may hinder further steps in this direction. Indeed, text simplification and, more specifically, translation in easy language is rarely an integral part of translators' training and there is a need for specific courses on the topic (Maaß 2020: 177). The willingness of translators to engage in linguistic accessibility is therefore insufficient without a proper strategy and adequate resources.

### 4.3 Stances towards E2U and potential difficulties

Bearing in mind that E2U is not yet a reality at the FSO (section 4.1) and that writers and translators have limited knowledge of it (section 4.2), it was interesting to learn about the participants' stances towards accessibility. It helped us to identify potential barriers to the implementation of E2U and the steps that might be taken to overcome them in the practical part of this collaboration.

#### *Usefulness of E2U*

First, we asked participants whether they think that accessible publications are useful for the FSO. The vast majority of the respondents answered positively, as shown below (Figure 4).

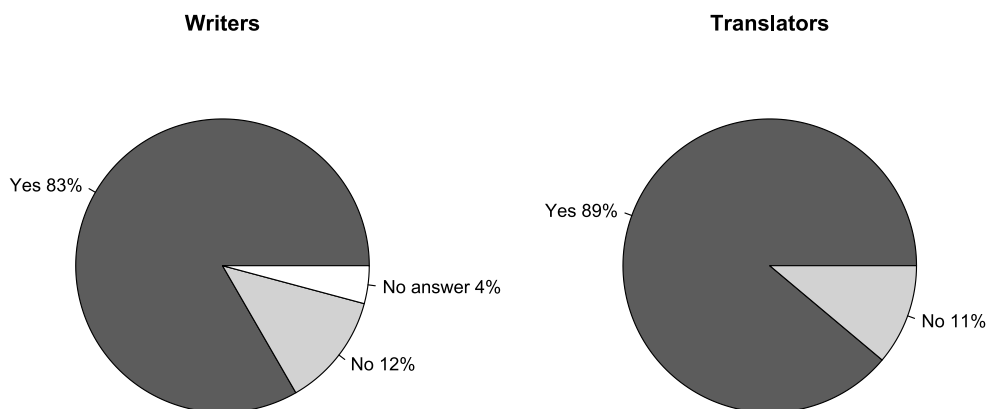


Figure 4: Usefulness of E2U for the FSO

Most writers and translators agree that only a selection of content should be offered in E2U. Some of them believe that separate, simplified publications should be produced, while others would prefer to integrate E2U summaries in already existing texts. Some examples include web pages (e. g., initial page of thematic sections), the most consulted publications (e. g., on population), summaries of press releases, overview publications, such as *Statistical Data on Switzerland* and leaflets, survey material, questionnaires and social media texts. Creating E2U information always involves some content reduction (Maaß 2020: 120–122); it is not possible (nor useful) to simplify each and every text and, within a text, relevant pieces of information are usually selected. The awareness among participants constitutes a solid basis for carrying out a cross reflection at the Office level on what content should be simplified for specific audiences.

#### *Interest in producing E2U content*

We also asked writers whether they are interested in creating plain language texts, and translators, plain and easy language texts.



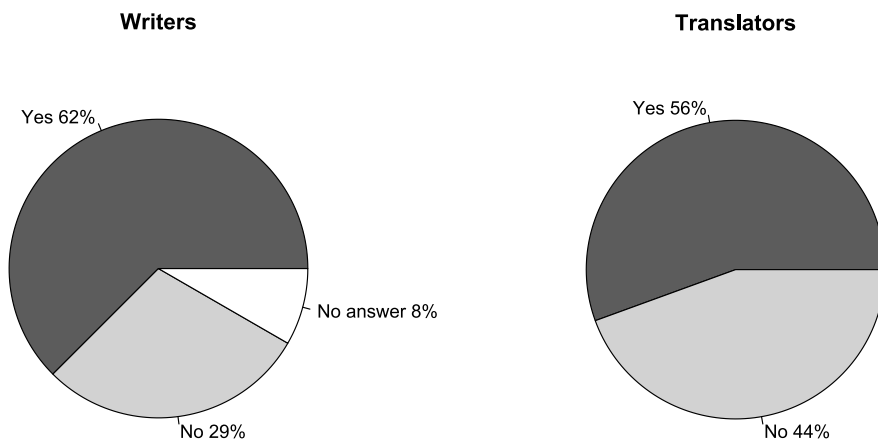


Figure 5: Interest in producing E2U content

The following table summarizes the primary reasons behind positive and negative answers:

	Writers	Translators
YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Interest in finding out new ways to make their texts more comprehensible</li> <li>– Curiosity and willingness to accept a challenge</li> <li>– Reach a wider public besides field experts</li> <li>– Reuse some E2U strategies in standard texts and improve them as well</li> <li>– Understand what can and what cannot be simplified</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Personal interest, challenge</li> <li>– Task diversification</li> <li>– Positive social impact</li> <li>– Curiosity</li> <li>– Language specialists are the right stakeholders for accessible communication</li> </ul>
NO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Lack of time due to many other tasks</li> <li>– It would fall outside their primary field of responsibility</li> <li>– Enough efforts are already made</li> <li>– Difficulty in explaining specialized terms for someone who does not work in data production</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Lack of knowledge about writing E2U content, but interest in translating simplified texts</li> <li>– Lack of time and resources</li> </ul>

Table 1: Interest and lack of interest in producing E2U content

Once again, more than a half of both groups gave a positive answer. The lower percentage of positive answers by translators is, in our view, mainly related to the high workload of the relatively small translation team within the FSO. The focus groups, which included translators, confirmed that there is interest in developing E2U skills, but their workload does not allow for them to take on additional tasks. Moreover, they have more marked linguistic awareness compared to domain experts. They understand the stakes of providing accessible communication and fear that they cannot easily compensate for their lack of knowledge in the field. However,

the fact that E2U is not being implemented concretely in the writing process, even though both groups recognize the usefulness of it, supports Skopal's (2022) and Gotti's (2018) plea for cooperation between linguists and domain experts in the production of comprehensible institutional texts.

### *Barriers to producing accessible publications*

The "NOs" in Table 1 exemplify the most relevant barriers and difficulties identified by respondents. These concerns are particularly related to complex content that can hardly be simplified, as put forward by one respondent:

One must dare to leave some gaps (leave out certain details, e. g., in definitions) in order to convey the main message without distorting the facts. (Writer\_24)<sup>15</sup>

The main concern brought up by our respondents is that they would not be able to handle terminology correctly, as they fear that they would have to compromise on precision and, consequently, correctness and transparency. For instance, the results of a survey could be interpreted incorrectly if detailed explanations and terminology are missing. Some respondents also fear that an oversimplified text would be less appealing and neglect the primary target's expectations.

As we have already stressed in previous sections, striking a balance between specialized communication and popularization for a general audience requires training and clear rules, and respondents are aware of it. As pointed out by several participants, aside from training, there would also need to be a lot of effort on an organizational and technical level. First, the persons who are in charge of these new tasks must be identified. Second, there would need to be more steps in the text production and circulation process, as well as a wider portfolio of text/text versions. Consequently, the writers' workload would increase. It would not just be a matter of changing habits; more resources would need to be allocated, which seems to be one of the major barriers. Finally, such a big and costly change requires a solid system to measure its impact and understand whether or not it is worth it to produce E2U content.

### *Sceptic stances*

Although the majority of respondents are convinced that E2U would be useful for the FSO, some of them also expressed scepticism for various reasons, as shown in the following quotes:

(Plain language is an) oversimplified language, both in terms of wording and vocabulary, which implies a loss of information and embraces a simplistic view of society and ongoing processes. (Writer\_07)<sup>16</sup>

On the one hand, this answer confirms the lack of knowledge of plain language, which is once again confused with easy language. However, it also reveals the concern that linguistic simplification can consistently lead to a lack of information and precision. This sentiment is confirmed by another writer:

<sup>15</sup> Original statement: "Es braucht den Mut zur Lücke (weglassen bestimmter Details z.B. bei Definitionen), um die Hauptbotschaft herüberbringen zu können, ohne Sachverhalte zu verfälschen."

<sup>16</sup> Original statement: "(Le langage clair est un) langage simplifié à l'extrême, tant dans la formulation que le vocabulaire, qui implique une perte d'information et s'approche d'une vision simpliste de la société et des processus en cours."

The maxim “Leave no one behind” may be appropriate for offices that provide “vital” basic public services. However, applying it to statistical information is detrimental to the great mass of well-educated citizens. (Writer\_15)<sup>17</sup>

This answer reflects one of the main concerns of highly specialized experts, namely that language simplification might lead to the loss of important information and that certain target groups might no longer be fully informed. One translator even related accessibility to economic considerations:

I see this as (...) a concern for profitability, as people are expected to digest more information in less time. Quantity, therefore, comes before quality, as it does everywhere in business (be it private or public). (Translator\_04)<sup>18</sup>

Simplifying texts in order to make subjects less complex can be useful. But taking people for fools is counterproductive. Moreover, is it up to us, writers and translators, to make up for the fact that public education has failed to ensure first language proficiency over the last few decades? (Translator\_04)<sup>19</sup>

In conclusion, these critical opinions relate to misconceptions of E2U, targets, aims of E2U, as well as social importance and responsibility. This further confirms the necessity of both training and developing a culture of accessibility.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we presented a specific case of expert-lay communication, i. e., the production of statistical information for the broader public within the Swiss multilingual institutional context. Our study showed the need to train FSO’s writers and translators so that they are able to face the challenges of E2U. It is paramount to develop widespread awareness or, in other words, a “culture of accessibility”. This also involves reflecting on the broader social interest of accessible communication and overcoming the scepticism expressed by some respondents. All in all, the findings from our survey provide a useful basis for developing specific training modules. As similar studies and research projects (Gotti 2018, Skopal 2022, cf. also Perego 2019 on the EASIT project) have shown, there is a need for interdisciplinary cooperation.

At the same time, there are practical concerns common to all multilingual institutions, like the lack of time and resources, as well as cost efficiency. These structural and financial bottlenecks may hamper the production of texts in plain and easy language. Indeed, it is only if E2U

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<sup>17</sup> Original statement: “Die Devise ‘Leave no one behind’ mag für Ämter angezeigt sein, die ‘lebensnotwendige’ staatliche Grunddienstleistungen anbieten. Wendet man sie jedoch auf statistische Informationen an, dann geschieht dies zum Nachteil der grossen Masse der gut gebildeten Bürgerinnen und Bürger.”

<sup>18</sup> Original statement: “J’y associe (...) un souci de rentabilité, puisqu’on veut que les gens digèrent davantage d’informations en moins de temps. La quantité passe donc avant la qualité, comme partout dans le monde de l’entreprise (privée ou publique d’ailleurs).”

<sup>19</sup> Original statement: “Simplifier les textes dans l’idée de décomplexifier la matière peut s’avérer utile. Mais prendre les gens pour des benêts est contre-productif. En outre, est-ce à nous, rédactrices ou traductrices, de pallier aux manques de l’instruction publique en matière de maîtrise de la langue première de ces dernière décennies?”

is perceived as a priority at the managerial level that it is possible to allocate time and resources to training and producing additional simplified texts. Undertaking direct field research helps us better understand these real-world implications, which are sometimes overlooked by researchers, even though they have a huge impact on the successful implementation of E2U.

A key finding concerns the target readership, which is not always clearly defined for each text genre, despite being an absolute precondition of effective writing (as stressed in most guidelines on clear language, such as the plain language guidelines, cf. PLAIN 2011). Keeping in mind Hoffmann's (1985) LSP model, the responses show that, in some cases, writers address several target groups with the same text and, in others, they produce texts for different target groups. They therefore need to be able to adapt content, level of technicality and language to different degrees of expertise, which is not always an easy task. Translators, on the other hand, seem to be aware of the importance of adapting texts to the target audiences, even though they sometimes do not receive this information along with the translation job. This skill is inherent to the activity of translation, which involves decoding and recoding the message, and is often seen as a means to overcome communication barriers (e. g., Maaß 2019a: 292 f.). As Neves (2022: 446) puts it,

[i]nterlingual translation eliminates language and cultural barriers; intralingual translation will take care of linguistic and stylistic variation that hinders understanding among same language speakers (...).

In our case, the multilingual institutional dimension requires adapting and “rethinking” E2U in terms of linguistic equivalence and harmonization. The interlingual (from one official and/or working language to the others) and the intralingual (from LSP to E2U) dimensions are interwoven, and aiming for accessibility does not only mean “writing accessible texts”, but “writing accessible texts and translating them into different languages”.

This has various practical consequences. While the positive impact of translation on clarity is undisputable, creating additional simplified texts for laypersons and doing so in different languages implies longer, more expensive procedures. As for the intersection between intralingual and interlingual translation, focusing on the necessary collaboration between writers and translators is a possible avenue to explore for future research. Plain language should primarily be implemented at the writing level. As experts in the field, it is desirable for writers to produce plain language texts themselves and benefit from the translators' input. It is proven that encoding a text in a different language involves deeper reflection on the source text message, thus often unveiling additional linguistic nuances and potential pitfalls. Conversely, easy language requires more specific linguistic and translation skills, which are better suited to the translator's work. However, given the high amount of textual simplification, this task cannot be carried out without the help of writers, with whom they would need to collaborate to define the appropriate level of content reduction (Maaß 2020: 170). The question of whether or not, to what extent, and how specialized statistical information and, more specifically, terminology can be simplified in plain and easy language presents a promising area for further collaboration between research and practice (an initial study in this field that is part of the same project is presented in Felici et al. 2023, forthcoming).

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning the potential use of neural machine translation (NMT) in interlingual text production. Previous studies have shown that NMT can prove to be useful for extending the information offer in several languages (Nurminen/Koponen 2020).

At the same time, both ethical considerations (Nurminen/Koponen 2020) and quality control (Rodríguez Vázquez et al. 2022) should be considered. However, the use of NMT within the language services of the Swiss Confederation is still in its infancy (Nussbaumer 2020) and it will probably not be possible in the immediate future.

Beyond the results of this case study, it would be highly interesting to repeat this survey on a larger scale and involve other federal Departments and Offices. This would allow us to gain a better understanding of the main trends that have an impact on straightforward institutional communication in E2U and to single out potential variables that only apply to specific contexts. In doing so, we can fully embrace and assist in the current trend (and need) of making institutional information accessible to the widest possible audience.

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## Annex 1: Questionnaire

((Welcome))	
<p>Diese Umfrage steht auf Deutsch und Französisch zur Verfügung. Sie können Ihre bevorzugte Sprache in der Menüleiste «Sprache ändern»/«Changer de langue» wählen.</p>	<p>Cette enquête est disponible en français et en allemand. Vous pouvez choisir votre langue de préférence dans la barre de menu «Sprache ändern»/«Changer de langue».</p>
<p>Willkommen und vielen Dank für Ihr Interesse an unserem Forschungsprojekt! Wir sind ein Forschungsteam an der Fakultät für Übersetzen und Dolmetschen (FTI) der Universität Genf und sind Mitglieder des Centre for Legal and Institutional Translation Studies, Transius.</p> <p>Derzeit führen wir ein Projekt zu verständlicher und barrierefreier Kommunikation von Institutionen durch. Eines der Ziele ist es, herauszufinden, wie bestimmte Zielgruppen, z.B. Menschen mit eingeschränkter Lese- und Verstehenskompetenz, durch Publikationen in vereinfachter Sprache besser angesprochen werden können. Ein weiteres Ziel ist es zu untersuchen, welche Möglichkeiten es gibt, die Kommunikation des BFS zugänglicher zu gestalten, und welche Grenzen der Barrierefreiheit gesteckt sind.</p> <p>Sie als Redaktorinnen und Redaktoren und als Übersetzerinnen und Übersetzer des BFS stehen im Zentrum der Textproduktion. Deshalb wären Sie von der Erstellung zugänglicher Texte möglicherweise direkt betroffen. Mit dieser qualitativen Umfrage zum Thema Verständlichkeit und barrierefreie Kommunikation möchten wir <b>Ihre Meinung erfahren und herausfinden, welche Möglichkeiten und Grenzen Sie als Textproduzentinnen und Textproduzenten sehen.</b></p> <p>Die Beantwortung des Fragebogens wird ca. 20 Minuten dauern. Wir versichern Ihnen, dass wir Ihre Antworten streng vertraulich behandeln, und garantieren Ihnen die Wahrung Ihrer Anonymität. Die Befragung erfolgt über den Server der Universität Genf.</p>	<p>Bienvenue et merci de votre intérêt pour notre projet de recherche ! Nous sommes une équipe de recherche de la Faculté de traduction et d'interprétation (FTI) de l'Université de Genève et membres du Centre d'études en traduction juridique et institutionnelle, Transius.</p> <p>Nous menons actuellement un projet sur la communication compréhensible et accessible au sein des institutions. L'un des objectifs du projet est de déterminer comment mieux atteindre certains groupes cibles, par exemple des personnes ayant des capacités de lecture et de compréhension limitées, par le biais de publications en langage simplifié. Un deuxième objectif est d'identifier les moyens de rendre les textes de l'OFS plus accessibles et de cerner les limites de la communication sans barrières.</p> <p>En tant que rédactrices/rédacteurs et traductrices/traducteurs de l'OFS, vous êtes au cœur du processus de production de textes. Vous seriez donc directement impliqués dans la production de textes accessibles. Par cette enquête qualitative sur le thème de la communication accessible, nous souhaitons <b>connaître votre opinion au sujet du potentiel et des limites que vous entrevoyez dans la production de ces textes.</b></p> <p>Le questionnaire a une durée d'environ 20 minutes. Nous vous assurons que nous traiterons vos réponses de manière strictement confidentielle et garantissons votre anonymat. Le questionnaire est géré par le serveur de l'Université de Genève.</p>



<p>Selbstverständlich haben Sie das Recht, die Befragung zu jedem Zeitpunkt, aus jedem beliebigen Grund und ohne daraus resultierenden Nachteil zu beenden.</p> <p>Sollten Sie Fragen oder Kommentare zur Befragung haben, kontaktieren Sie xxx Sie können Ihre Fragen auf Deutsch, Französisch, Italienisch oder Englisch senden.</p> <p>Vielen Dank, dass Sie sich die Zeit nehmen und an der Umfrage teilnehmen.</p>	<p>Bien entendu, vous avez le droit de mettre fin à l'enquête à tout moment, sans devoir indiquer la raison de votre choix et sans conséquences pour vous.</p> <p>Si vous avez des questions ou des commentaires sur l'enquête, vous êtes priés de contacter xxx Vous pouvez leur écrire en allemand, français, italien ou anglais.</p> <p>Merci d'avance de votre disponibilité !</p>
<p><b>((Repondents' profile))</b></p>	
<p>Ist Ihre Haupttätigkeit das Verfassen/Veröffentlichen oder das Übersetzen von Texten?</p>	<p>Votre activité principale, est-elle la rédaction/publication ou la traduction de textes ?</p>
<p><b>((Questions for writers))</b></p>	
<p><b>Teil 1</b> <b>Ausbildung und aktuelle Tätigkeiten</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aus welcher Disziplin kommen Sie (Studien-/Ausbildungsabschluss)?</li> <li>• In welchem Bereich sind Sie derzeit tätig?</li> <li>• Seit wie vielen Jahren sind Sie in der Redaktion/Veröffentlichung tätig?</li> <li>• Wie oft verfassen Sie Texte? (z.B.: jeden Tag mindestens eine Stunde, einmal pro Woche, sehr sporadisch usw.)</li> <li>• Welche anderen Aufgaben haben Sie ausser der Redaktion von Texten? (z.B. Korrekturlesen von Texten der Kolleginnen und Kollegen, Überprüfung von Übersetzungen usw.)</li> <li>• In welchen Sprachen verfassen und/oder bearbeiten Sie Texte?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Partie 1</b> <b>Formation et responsabilités actuelles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quelle est votre discipline (diplôme/formation) ?</li> <li>• Dans quel domaine travaillez-vous actuellement ?</li> <li>• Depuis combien d'années travaillez-vous dans le domaine de la rédaction/publication ?</li> <li>• A quelle fréquence rédigez-vous des textes ? (par exemple : au moins une heure par jour, une fois par semaine, très sporadiquement, etc.)</li> <li>• Quelles sont vos autres tâches outre la rédaction de textes ? (par exemple : correction des textes des collègues, révision des traductions, etc.)</li> <li>• Dans quelles langues rédigez-vous et/ou révisez-vous des textes ?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teil 2</b> <b>Textredaktion</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welche Art von Texten verfassen Sie am häufigsten?</li> <li>• Welches sind die Hauptzielgruppen Ihrer Texte?</li> <li>• Denken Sie, dass die von Ihnen/Ihrer Abteilung veröffentlichten Texte für die breite Öffentlichkeit verständlich sind?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Partie 2</b> <b>Rédaction de textes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quel genre de textes rédigez-vous le plus souvent ?</li> <li>• Quels sont les principaux groupes cibles de vos textes ?</li> <li>• Pensez-vous que les textes publiés par votre unité ou par vous-même sont compréhensibles pour le grand public ?</li> </ul>

**Teil 3****Barrierefreiheit**

- Was verbinden Sie mit den Begriffen «Einfache Sprache», «plain language» und «Leichte Sprache»?
- Haben Sie das Thema Barrierefreiheit in Ihrer Abteilung schon diskutiert?  
Wenn ja:
  - Was wird hauptsächlich besprochen?
  - Spielt die sprachliche Barrierefreiheit eine Rolle?
 Wenn nein:
  - Kennen Sie die Gründe, warum zugängliche Texte noch kein Thema sind?
- Denken Sie, dass vereinfachte Publikationen des BFS sinnvoll sein könnten?  
Wenn ja:
  - Welche Publikationen könnten das sein?
  - Welche Grenzen oder Schwierigkeiten sehen Sie bei der Vereinfachung der Inhalte, für die Sie normalerweise zuständig sind?
 Wenn nein:
  - Welche Grenzen oder Schwierigkeiten sehen Sie bei der Vereinfachung der Inhalte, für die Sie normalerweise zuständig sind?
- Wären Sie selbst daran interessiert, vereinfachte Texte zu erstellen?
  - Ja, Begründung:
  - Nein, Begründung:
- Welche Auswirkungen könnte die Einführung vereinfachter Publikationen auf die Arbeitsprozesse in Ihrem Bereich haben?
- Wären Sie an einem Workshop zur Redaktion zugänglicher Texte interessiert?
  - Ja
  - Nein

**Partie 3****Accessibilité**

- Qu'associez-vous aux termes « langage simple », « plain language », « langage facile à lire et à comprendre (FALC) » ?
- Le sujet de l'accessibilité a-t-il déjà été abordé dans votre unité ?  
Si oui :
  - Quels aspects ont été principalement discutés ?
  - L'accessibilité linguistique joue-t-elle un rôle ?
 Si non :
  - Connaissez-vous les raisons pour lesquelles les textes accessibles ne sont pas encore un sujet d'actualité ?
- Pensez-vous que des publications simplifiées à l'OFS pourraient être utiles ?  
Si oui :
  - De quelles publications s'agirait-il ?
  - Quelles sont les limites ou les difficultés liées à la simplification des contenus dont vous êtes responsable ?
 Si non :
  - Quelles limites ou difficultés rencontrez-vous dans la simplification des contenus dont vous êtes responsable ?
- Seriez-vous intéressé à rédiger vous-même des textes simplifiés ?
  - Oui, parce que :
  - Non, parce que :
- Quel est l'impact potentiel de l'introduction de publications simplifiées sur les processus de travail dans votre unité ?
- Seriez-vous intéressé par un atelier sur la rédaction de textes accessibles ?
  - Oui
  - Non

((Questions for translators))	
<p><b>Teil 1</b> <b>Ausbildung und aktuelle Tätigkeiten</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aus welcher Disziplin kommen Sie (Studien-/Ausbildungsabschluss)?</li> <li>• Seit wie vielen Jahren sind Sie als Übersetzerin/Übersetzer tätig?</li> </ul>	<p><b>Partie 1</b> <b>Formation et responsabilités actuelles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quelle est votre discipline (diplôme/formation) ?</li> <li>• Depuis combien d'années travaillez-vous en tant que traductrice/traducteur ?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teil 2</b> <b>Übersetzungstätigkeit</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Welche Art von Texten übersetzen Sie am häufigsten?</li> <li>• Was sind Ihre Hauptschwierigkeiten beim Übersetzen der Texte?</li> <li>• Sind Ihnen die Hauptzielgruppen der Texte, die Sie übersetzen, bekannt? Welche sind diese?</li> <li>• Denken Sie, dass die von Ihrem Amt veröffentlichten Texte für die breite Öffentlichkeit verständlich sind?</li> <li>• Versuchen Sie zuweilen, bei der Übersetzung Texte verständlicher zu formulieren?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Wenn ja, in welcher Weise?</li> <li>◦ Wenn nein, gibt es Gründe?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>Partie 2</b> <b>Activités de traduction</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quel genre de textes traduisez-vous le plus souvent ?</li> <li>• Quelles sont les difficultés principales que vous rencontrez dans la traduction des textes ?</li> <li>• Connaissez-vous les principaux groupes cibles des textes que vous traduisez ? Lesquels sont-ils ?</li> <li>• Pensez-vous que les textes publiés par l'OFS sont compréhensibles pour le grand public ?</li> <li>• Essayez-vous parfois de rendre les textes plus compréhensibles lorsque vous les traduisez ?             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Si oui, de quelle manière ?</li> <li>◦ Si non, y a-t-il des raisons ?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Teil 3</b> <b>Barrierefreiheit</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Was verbinden Sie mit den Begriffen «Einfache Sprache», «plain language» und «Leichte Sprache»?</li> <li>• Haben Sie das Thema Barrierefreiheit in Ihrer Abteilung schon diskutiert? Wenn ja:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Was wird hauptsächlich besprochen?</li> <li>◦ Spielt die sprachliche Barrierefreiheit eine Rolle?</li> </ul>             Wenn nein:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Kennen Sie Gründe, warum zugängliche Texte noch kein Thema sind?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><b>Partie 3</b> <b>Accessibilité</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qu'associez-vous aux termes « langage simple », « plain language », « langage facile à lire et à comprendre (FALC) » ?</li> <li>• Le sujet de l'accessibilité a-t-il déjà été abordé dans votre unité ? Si oui :             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Quels aspects ont été principalement discutés ?</li> <li>◦ L'accessibilité linguistique joue-t-elle un rôle ?</li> </ul>             Si non :             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Connaissez-vous les raisons pour lesquelles les textes accessibles ne sont pas encore un sujet d'actualité ?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denken Sie, dass vereinfachte Publikationen des BFS sinnvoll sein könnten? Wenn ja: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Welche Publikationen könnten das sein?</li> <li>◦ Welche Grenzen oder Schwierigkeiten sehen Sie bei der Vereinfachung der Inhalte, die Sie normalerweise übersetzen?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Wenn nein: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Welche Grenzen oder Schwierigkeiten sehen Sie bei der Vereinfachung der Inhalte, die Sie normalerweise übersetzen?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Wären Sie selbst daran interessiert, vereinfachte Texte oder Texte in Leichter Sprache zu erstellen? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Ja, Begründung:</li> <li>◦ Nein, Begründung:</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Wären Sie an einem einführenden Workshop zur Redaktion zugänglicher Texte interessiert? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Ja</li> <li>◦ Nein</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pensez-vous que des publications simplifiées à l'OFS pourraient être utiles ? Si oui : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ De quelles publications s'agirait-il ?</li> <li>◦ Quelles sont les limites ou les difficultés liés à la simplification des contenus que vous traduisez ?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Si non : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Quelles limites ou difficultés entrevoyez-vous dans la simplification des contenus que vous traduisez ?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Seriez-vous intéressé à rédiger vous-même des textes en langage simple ou en FALC ? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Oui, raison :</li> <li>◦ Non, raison :</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Seriez-vous intéressé par un atelier sur la rédaction de textes accessibles ? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Oui</li> <li>◦ Non</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>((Conclusion))</b>	
<p><b>Schluss</b> Wir würden uns freuen, wenn wir Sie für ein Interview kontaktieren dürften. Wenn Sie einverstanden sind, geben Sie bitte hier Ihre E-Mail-Adresse an.</p> <p>Vielen Dank, dass Sie sich die Zeit genommen haben, unsere Fragen zu beantworten!</p>	<p><b>Conclusion</b> Pouvons-nous vous contacter pour d'autres questions ? Si tel est le cas, nous vous saurions grés de bien vouloir indiquer votre adresse de courriel.</p> <p>Merci d'avoir pris le temps de répondre à nos questions !</p>

# Legal Communication. The Sociolinguistic Value of Plain Language Rules

*Joanna Kowalczyk*

**Abstract** Legal, legislative, and official texts are specific types of oral and written documents. Often, the vocabulary and unnatural grammar structures they contain make it difficult to understand them. This particularly affects the quality of communication involving non-professional discourse participants. Therefore, numerous countries around the world have recognized the need for introducing writing rules that will make official communications clear and comprehensible as far as possible. The article addresses the issue of *plain language* rules studied from the perspective of their potential to reveal the perpetuation of inequalities between authorities and citizens. It focuses on the sociolinguistic value of *plain language* rules which, from this perspective, are not just stylistic guidelines but a form of democratizing authoritarian and unequal interaction. The aim of the study was to show how *plain language* rules highlighted negative social rituals occurring within legal discourses. In the course of the analysis, hierarchizing, distancing, dominating and discriminating communicative procedures applied in the authority-citizen relationship were distinguished.

**Keywords** authority-citizen relationship, institutional discourse, jargon, legal language, plain language

## 1 Introduction

Public institutions are the source of thousands of texts intended either for a potentially wide readership (e. g., legal acts, announcements on websites) or as documents issued in individual cases. Many of these texts, however, include features of separateness, artificiality, and hermeticity. There are numerous perspectives of observation. From the linguistic perspective, their distinctiveness manifests itself, for example, in the use of special terminology, unusual vocabulary, unnatural grammatical constructions, etc. All this makes legal, administrative, or judicial texts a barrier to communication between authorities and citizens. The problem has been identified globally, and is addressed by promoting ‘plain language’, intended to counterbalance the established communication routines in the relationship between authorities and citizens. This article focuses on the sociolinguistic value of plain language rules, which, when viewed from this perspective, are not merely stylistic guidelines but a pragmatic change in the form of communication between authorities and the rest of society, democratizing this kind of interaction. The aim of the study is to show how the rules of plain language have highlighted social processes taking place within legal discourses (legislative, official or judicial). An attempt has also been made to describe the main cultural and social barriers in the authority-citizen relationship that can be abstracted from the rules of plain language.

The methodological basis of the analysis was complex as the problem itself is a complicated matter. For this reason, tools from sociological, sociolinguistic and psychological sciences

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were used, such as linguistic pragmatics (James 1907, Levinson 2000), social distance theory (Mulder 1977, Hofstede 2010), social dominance theory (Sidanius 1993, Sidanius/Pratto 1999, Pratto/Stewart 2011), or the concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1989, Bourdieu 2002).

The first part of the article includes a detailed description of the cultural-civilizational sources of social inequalities in the context of their impact on interactions in different fields of human functioning (section 2). This is considered necessary to fully understand the rest of the article. This section aims to show how the rules of social coexistence adopted in a particular community affect the forms of communication among its members, also in official relationships. Another section contains a description of the most important aspects considered when formulating the rules of plain language, and of their actual use in legal, official, or judicial writing (section 3). The following part of the article describes the plain language rules from the perspective of their potential (section 4): firstly to democratize language in official contacts, secondly, to highlight those elements which are socially undesirable because they make communication a tool of power and discrimination. The paper closes with some conclusions (section 5).

## 2 From social domination to symbolic violence

In this section, we will begin by looking at the predominance of one over the other in various aspects of life – from the ease or difficulty of access to material goods, through working conditions, up to the possibility of realizing professional or political aspirations (Klebaniuk 2010: 42). Social dominance is a phenomenon that is commonly observed in hierarchically organized communities. For one group to be considered dominant, there needs to be a functioning counterbalance, i. e. the dominated group. Maintaining and perpetuating such a division leads to the perpetuation of differences and, as a consequence, to the formation of a “culture of distance” (Mulder 1977, Hofstede 2010).

The term *culture of distance* refers to the social acceptance of inequalities and the tolerance of superior-subordinate relationships in various spheres of functioning, e. g., in the family, school, or work. In family relationships, the culture of distance manifests itself through the cultivation of patriarchy, matriarchy or through the subordination of children to their parents (cf. Proverbs 13:24 “*Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them*”) or by depreciating the role of children (cf. the English saying children should be seen and not heard or the Polish saying *dzieci i ryby głosu nie mają* [children and fish have no voices]). During school education, on the other hand, it is the teacher who plays the role of the person who deserves *a priori* respect from the pupil. Depending on the rules of a given educational establishment, subordination may be expressed in different ways, e. g. in order to speak, the pupil must first raise their hand and receive permission from the teacher; when answering teacher’s questions the pupil should stand up; the pupil should use appropriate forms of politeness. In the workplace, distance is defined explicitly – through the use of job-related naming units, which are not the names of the job (e. g., *salesman, driver, physician*) but linguistic signs that emphasize the division between prestigious and subordinate positions (e. g., managerial/higher position vs. lower-level position, superior vs. subordinate; white-collar vs. blue-collar, etc.).

Hofstede (2010) also describes the culture of distance using the example of the state, defining it as the unilateral dependence of the individual member of a community on the state as an organization to which a person is assigned from birth and thus without his or her knowledge or consent.

In state structures, the main dissonance is based on the *state-citizen* relationship. Dominance is somehow “given” to the state as a systemic organization. It manifests itself primarily in the institutional ordering of life, which constitutes the values that sustain the dominance of the state authorities and justifies the actions which subordinate society members to the imposed vision of the world (Mulder 1977). In this case, the culture of distance rests on two pillars. The first is the passive acceptance of the *status quo*, which by definition is beyond the control of the ordinary person and thus must be accepted by them. At the other extreme, there is the strengthening of the status of predominance/superiority of the creators and continuators of this order (the authorities and their representatives). Being accustomed to the existing conditions manifests itself, for example, in the recognition and acceptance of social inequalities between representatives of certain professional groups (e. g., lawyers, physicians, scientists) or representatives of the authorities (courts, the police, civil servants, etc.) and the remaining members of society, who, convinced of their inferiority, accept the imposed order (Hofstede 2010).

The consequence of a disproportionate balance of power which fosters a widening gap between elite and egalitarian groups lies in the reinforcement and justification of this dissonance. This phenomenon is referred to in social dominance theory (Sidanius 1993, Sidanius/Pratto 1999) according to which dominant groups seek to maintain divisions and inequalities in order to defend their superior, privileged position. Maintaining disparities between groups is also possible because elite groups have tools that are not available to the rest of the community (Pratto/Stewart 2011: 1). Depending on the specific features of the group, these may include special insider knowledge (e. g., physicians, lawyers, scientists), the ability to make laws (politicians), the ability to interpret laws (representatives of the executive and judicial professions), the ability to impose punishment (e. g., judges, police officers) and discretion in decision-making (e. g., selection boards).

The reinforcement of the belief that a particular group is superior is also supported by “legitimizing myths” (Pratto/Stewart 2011: 2). Legitimizing myths manifest themselves in the use of loaded vocabulary, which is supposed to confirm the superiority of some over others (e. g., *outstanding specialist vs. ordinary worker; statesman/true patriot vs. enemy of the nation; passionate teacher vs. old-fashioned teacher*). Legitimizing myths also employ rhetoric that portrays the actions of the elite group as appropriate and axiologically necessary (e. g., *it is for your own good; because of an important social interest; for the good of the fatherland; to maintain public order; in order to counteract the depravity of the young*). Thus, social domination consists in the desire of members of elite groups to continuously strengthen their position by cultivating the stereotype of ‘we know better; therefore we can do more’.

It should be noted that the domination of one group over another does not have to be explicitly confirmed. Sometimes the domination is invisible and therefore takes place with the tacit consent of the dominated party, which perceives its position as normal because it knows no other reality. Bourdieu calls this phenomenon “symbolic violence” (1989, 2002). According to Bourdieu, symbolic violence consists in the fact that privileged groups impose on dominated groups their own vision of the world, their values and rules as universal, proper, necessary and having no alternative. He points out that symbolic violence is based on a particular kind of obedience that the dominated cannot denounce to the dominator (Bourdieu 1986: 113). This obedience, in turn, is the result of an ongoing, systematized and long-term process of “educating” subordinate groups into believing that this is the way the world is. At the linguistic level, this pressure is visible, for example, in utterances treated as universal truths, independent of circumstances, as consent to issuing bans and orders or as depreciation of needs, opinions, achievements of the dominated group.

Symbolic violence can be seen in various areas of life. Parents dominate their children (e. g., *I am your mum and you have to listen to me*<sup>1</sup>; *you are grounded till the end of the week; you better start studying; when you grow up you will change your mind; when I was your age I thought the same*), teachers dominate their pupils (e. g., *in order to say something you need to raise your hand first; as punishment you will do extra exercises*), bosses dominate their subordinates (e. g., *I am the boss here, if you don't like it here you can go, there are ten people waiting to replace you*), authorities impose rules on their citizens (e. g., *not knowing the law is harmful; the court imposes a 10-year-prison sentence on the defendant; there is no appeal from the decision*).

As already mentioned, the essence of symbolic violence is also its hidden form thanks to which it occurs, in a sense, with the consent of both parties – the dominant and the dominated. This is because the dominated groups do not recognize the oppressive nature of some of the rules imposed and begin to treat them as natural. Often these rules are internalized. In such cases the dominated groups accept the imposed norms as their own and function by obeying them (Bourdieu 1998: 57), as is evidenced by phrases such as: *this is the tradition; you have to get used to it; I am just an ordinary person; this is how it has always been; this is life; they probably know better*.

One of the most powerful generators of distance and social domination are the institutions of state power. This is because they have the capacity and instruments to introduce and maintain certain rules to which citizens must conform. This also applies to the form of communication between state bodies and citizens. The language of legal acts, court decisions, documents issued by public administration bodies is a combination of hermetic nomenclature and complicated grammatical constructions (Tanner 2000, Kowalczyk 2021). The specific language code used by the authorities, state institutions and officials is also a manifestation of their distinctiveness, strength and position. The disharmony of language competences between the representatives of authorities and citizens may significantly disrupt the efficient functioning of many areas of social and political life (Harley 2014).

An example of a highly welcome initiative to reduce disparity in contacts between authorities and citizens is provided by the proposal for using the rules of clear communication in official writing. It is an initiative that has been developing for many years and is aimed at eliminating barriers to communication between the state and the citizen. The following part of the article will be devoted to explaining how the rules of formulating messages aimed at reducing the distance and making the communication between state authorities and citizens friendly have highlighted the processes sustaining social inequalities.

### 3 Plain language as a form of democratizing official communication

The need to speak and write in such a way that information can be understood by non-professional participants in interaction has been debated for some time. The idea to introduce plain language grew gradually, sometimes imperceptibly (indicated by isolated comments on excessively complicated language of official documents). One of the first politicians to recognize the need to streamline official communication was Winston Churchill. In his 1940 memorandum entitled “Brevity”, the British Prime Minister wrote: “To do our work, we all have to read a mass of papers. Nearly all of them are far too long. This wastes time, while energy has to be spent

<sup>1</sup> The examples in this and the next paragraph are not quotations. The examples are for illustrative purposes only.



in looking for the essential points.” (Churchill 1940) In the 1970s, interest in simplifying<sup>2</sup> legal and administrative documentation was expressed by the US presidents Nixon and Carter (History and timeline). Since that, the idea to produce comprehensible documents in the official sphere has grown and gained recognition globally. Numerous examples can be given (Schriver 2017, Williams 2023); however, this article will cite only a few, as they fall outside the main topic of the present analyses:

- In the United States, a law has been introduced constituting the idea of writing “to the layman”, in the Plain Writing Act (Public Law 111 – 274); the principles of simplifying communication are also presented on a specially created website (Federal plain language guidelines).
- The Government of Canada has made a Style Guide (Content Style Guide) available online, which provides guidelines for formulating documents to be understandable to non-professional participants in discourse.
- In the UK, *plain language* is mandatory on all government websites (UK Government).
- Poland has adopted the same system for creating government websites. Similar to the British *gov.uk* pages is the Polish website *obywatel.gov.pl* (PL Government), which provides information on public services in an accessible form.
- In France, the Constitutional Council has recognized that it is the right of every citizen to understand documents received from state institutions (Décision 2001-455).

These examples alone show that the interest in simplifying communication between the authorities and citizens has become a reality.

As far as specific rules for simplifying official communications and writings are concerned, they are both diverse and universal. The specific rules for the simplification of communication are strictly related to the specifics of particular groups and language codes. The universality of the rules, on the other hand, is connected to the main goal of the *plain language*, which is the democratization of official communication. The office-citizen interaction should be clear for all participants of the discussion, it should provide equal access to information and give a chance to understand what is being said correctly. For this reason, jargon, unnatural grammatical constructions, complicated terminology and foreign language embellishments should be excluded as a matter of principle. It is these universal rules that have allowed us to see the cognitive potential of *plain language* policy, which goes beyond strictly linguistic boundaries.

#### **4 How the plain language has revealed forms of distance, domination, and discrimination**

For the purposes of this study, the *plain language* rules were taken from the official website of the United States government. This source is chosen as a generally accessible database listing the rules of comprehensible communication. Therefore, they were considered as a foundation for other, detailed catalogues of rules for simplifying official communication developed within separate structures (states, organizations, public institutions).

Universal recommendations have been extracted from the available list of tips. They are presented in a simplified form in the table below.

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<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the phrases ‘to simplify language’ or ‘simplifying communication’ as used in this article refer only to writing that is complete in its content and meaning while fully comprehensible.

<b>Write the text with the target audience in mind</b>	Use language that makes the recipient comfortable; Put yourself in the recipient's shoes; Don't write as if you are writing to experts, lawyers, if they are not your target audience; Address the recipient directly, as if you were actually talking to them; Write so that the recipient knows who the sender is; Write positively – be specific about what the recipient needs to do, why and for what ( <i>do it!</i> ), not what they will face if they don't; Use natural grammar; Use examples
<b>Organize the text (graphics, cohesion, chronology)</b>	Start with the most important information; Start with the purpose and effect, only then indicate the rationale; Divide the text into sections and use headings; Use enumerations/lists instead of descriptions
<b>Use general language and do not complicate your statements</b>	Use natural vocabulary; Do not use outdated words; Do not use jargon or specific terms of art; Do not use foreign words/phrases; Ensure that the statement is unambiguous
<b>Be concise</b>	Leave out information that the sender does not need to know; Keep sentences short; Keep to the point and avoid digressions; Avoid a "flowery" style; Write about specifics; Avoid abstract arguments

Table 1: The universal principles of plain language

Source: Own elaboration based on Plain language guidelines (<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>)

Analyzing the universal principles of democratizing official language, it was noted that they implicitly revealed actions by state institutions that could be pre-qualified as manifestations of domination, power and superiority. In order to clarify this detailed issue, it is first necessary to define how controversial social phenomena can be observed in apparently neutral indications of the simplification of official language. The main conclusion of the observation is that since a catalogue of desirable and undesirable communicative practices has emerged, it means that until now good practices have been somewhat rare, and the level of textual complexity has taken a destructive turn and required the implementation of corrective measures. The rules for simplifying language show that institutional texts are 'alien' to the ordinary citizen, there is no concern for meeting their needs, no desire to connect with the recipient on some common ground that is comfortable for both parties. The proposed guidelines for simplifying official texts therefore revealed that the needs of non-professional discourse participants were not being met. With this in mind, an attempt was made to consider the rules of *plain language* in terms of the social consequences highlighted by these rules.

Firstly, it was noted that the universal principles of *plain language* revealed the textual manifestation of the privileged position of authorities. This was highlighted by indications of eliminating the lofty style of expression combined with an overzealous and strenuous effort to ensure that the form of the text did not resemble general language, to make it clear that the sender was someone special.

Secondly, it was observed that rules indicated that institutional texts are characterized by communicative actions directly impeding the understanding of the content and thus limiting access to information. This is evidenced by the presence of rules designed to make the text coherent and to rid it of redundant elements.

The trends observed, based on the reflections presented in the previous section of the article, can be assigned to two main categories: distance and domination / discrimination and confusion. Table 2 shows how the perspective of looking at the principles of language simplification might change if they are ordered in terms of the impact of communicative practices on social relations.

<b>countering distance and domination practices</b>	<b>countering discriminatory and confusing practices</b>
Use language that makes your audience comfortable; Use natural vocabulary; Use natural grammar; Do not use outdated words; Address the recipient directly, as if you were really talking to them; Write so that the recipient knows who the sender is; Write positively – be specific about what you want the recipient to do ( <i>do it!</i> ), not what the consequences will be if they don't; Avoid a 'flowery' style; Write about specifics; Avoid abstract arguments	Put yourself in the shoes of the recipient; Don't write as if you are writing to experts, lawyers, if they are not your target audience; Use examples; Start with the most important information; Start with the objective and the effect, only then identify the rationale; Leave out information that the sender does not need to know; Divide text into sections and use headings; Shorten sentences; Stick to the point and avoid digressions; Use enumerations/lists instead of descriptions; Don't use jargon or difficult terms; Do not use foreign words/phrases; Ensure that the statement is unambiguous

Table 2: The social dimension of plain language principles

Source: Own elaboration based on Plain language guidelines (<https://www.plainlanguage.gov/>)

To illustrate the rules listed in Table 2, let us give some examples excerpted from actual official communications. The examples will be described to explain in detail the difference between a text written in an official style and a text written according to the plain language standard. Each text is followed by its version(s) reviewed and edited following the rules of clear communication.

**Example 1**

**The original text:**

“In the case of occurrence of changes affecting the amount of tax liability, the taxpayer is obliged to submit within 14 days as of the occurrence of those changes appropriate information completed on the form consistent with the adopted template (...) (PE-OF-I 3127.499.2023)”.

The original text contains 40 words. The plain language rules recommend sentences consisting of about 20 words. The text uses unusual vocabulary: *is obliged to* instead of *must*; *in the case of occurrence of changes* instead of *if changes occur/take place*. Elements of jargon are also observed that make the text considerably longer: *submit appropriate information* instead of *inform*; *the form consistent with the adopted template* instead of *the prescribed form*.

### The text edited following the rules of plain language:

If changes **occur** that affect the amount of **tax liability/tax**, the taxpayer **must give information** about those changes on the **prescribed** form. The taxpayer has 14 days to do this after the changes **took place/occurred**.

If the text is sent to a specific recipient, the rules of clear communication recommend addressing the reader directly, i. e.:

If changes **occur** that affect the amount of **tax liability/tax**, **you must give information** about those changes on the **prescribed** form. You have 14 days to do this after the changes **took place/occurred**.

The text edited in line with the rules of clear communication is divided into two shorter sentences. Unusual vocabulary is changed into common language, and jargon replaced with everyday words.

### Example 2

#### The original text:

“(…) if it was the intent of the legislator and ratio legis of the Energy Act that a sine qua non condition for a power line to be considered a direct line would be the complete absence of connection to the National Power Grid, this would without doubt be expressly said in the Act (XVII AmE 61/14)”.

In Example 2, I wish to indicate its rather grand style consisting in the use of such phrases as *if it was the intent of the legislator* instead of *if the legislator wished*; *without doubt* instead of *certainly*. The text also contains Latin phrases that may be incomprehensible to people unfamiliar with Latin legal terminology: *if it was the (...) ratio legis of the Energy Act that a sine qua non condition would be* instead of *if the sense of the Energy Act was that a necessary condition would be*.

#### The text edited following the rules of plain language:

(…) the absence of connection to the National Power Grid is not a necessary condition for the classification of a power line as a direct line. If it was a necessary condition, the legislator would indicate it in the Energy Act.

The single sentence is rewritten in the edited version as two sentences. Grandiloquent language is replaced with common words. The Latin phrases are replaced with familiar terms.

The following section of the article will be devoted to a detailed analysis of the categories of distance and domination and discrimination and confusion, from the perspective of the attitude of state bodies towards citizens.

#### 4.1 *Creating distance as a sign of domination*

In the present article, *distance* is understood as the cultivation of disparities within the framework of the *exceptional-popular* dichotomy, which is the division into a dominant and a dominated subject. Building up distance means, therefore, reinforcing differences which, on the one hand, emphasize the uniqueness and dominant role of the sender (authority, office, institution) and, on the other, upset the recipient. The result is the formation of an asymmetrical relationship between public institutions and citizens. Institutions create barriers with their detached, haughty attitude towards citizens, while citizens are somehow put in the role of those who should buy into their favor.

In the linguistic sphere, this manifests itself in a move away from the use of generic language and towards a formalized, serious or dignified text. Emphasizing the uniqueness of discourse can be done in many ways. Distancing (e. g. in court) starts with ritual phrases of politeness such as *Your Honour* or the command *all rise*. These examples are not only an accepted convention, but a form of emphasizing the disproportion between the actors. The institutional sender may use sophisticated vocabulary to emphasize the importance of the moment, e. g.; *to discharge* instead of *to pay*; *to produce a document* instead of *to show a document*; *to owe an apology* instead of *should apologize*; *to spend a sum of money* instead of *spending money*; *larceny* instead of *stealing a phone*; *to pay legal costs* instead of *paying a lawyer*, etc. The ritual of distancing and domination is also a nomenclature that manifests the reification of a person to the level of a party to a proceeding, a party to a lawsuit, a party to a dispute, etc. This means that in the course of institutional discourse a person ceases to be treated only as a man named John Smith, as a citizen of the city or as a parent, and is in a sense transformed into the status of a defendant, a victim of a crime, an applicant, an interested party (in court), etc. In extreme cases, the addressee is treated as if they did not exist at all, and words are uttered as if into a vacuum. The omission of the addressee reduces the text to an instruction manual, which contains guidelines for performing a given action. The difference in the status between the sender and the addressee is manifested by ignoring the existence of a specific addressee, e. g., *Documents must be delivered by 20 April* instead of *You must deliver the documents by 20 April*. This effect is further strengthened when the entire communication is conducted with the omission of names or polite phrases such as *Mrs/Mr*, and the parties to the discourse are referred to in the text as third parties, e. g., *Does the accused plead guilty?*; *The mayor agrees to the party's request*; *The head of the tax office imposes a fine on the taxpayer*. The form of communication in which state institutions address the addressee (citizen) according to their current status in the case, and refer to themselves using the form of the third person, in a sense strips the interaction of the emotional, human factor and creates the illusion of a parallel world governed only by facts, factual elements, cold objectivity and emotionlessness. The narrative constructed in this way results in both sender and receiver being presented as abstract entities, detached from their human forms. A way of reinforcing this abstractness is also to promote passive speech. Impersonal forms add an element of soullessness to the text. In a discussion or during an argument, it is only the recipient-citizen that is exposed and visible. The sender-dominator ceases to be a real person. This is particularly evident when the sender-dominator is referred to as an institution (e. g., a court, the State of Nevada, a city hall) and a specific person, e. g., an official sending a letter to a citizen, acts only on its behalf (e. g., *it has been decided to dismiss a complaint*; *the following rules are established*; *the list of candidates has been announced*). In a sense, the sender is abstract, and the person who made a particular decision, performed a

particular action or wrote a letter is only a tangible intermediary between the transcendental institution and the material world.

Another element of distancing and domination is the introduction of complex grammatical constructions. The use of unnatural grammar constructions is not merely a linguistic device but an introduction of alienation into communication. Linguistic strangeness, in turn, evokes in the recipient a sense of unease, awkwardness, and incompatibility with the sender. Creating strangeness can move from emphasis to a formalistic, bureaucratic style. Emphasis in legal and administrative texts “exaggerates” the content and makes it manneristic, dramatic, even theatrical. An example of artificial pathos can be the use of punctuation, for example: *Rarely had the court so many doubts; Were the defendant to apologize, he would have already apologized* [omitting “if”] or a slightly archaic vocabulary (Kimble 2006: 173–174), e. g., *hereby, heretofore, whatsoever*. At the opposite extreme is the emphasis on a technocratic tone of communication and the exaggerated reinforcement of the sense of seriousness of the situation. This is fostered, among other things, by the multitude of analytical constructions. The simplest phenomena are presented as exceptional and serious issues are made even more serious, which further enhances the eccentricity of the institutional sender and the sense of alienation in the recipient. *To pay* sounds common, but *to make a payment* gives the impression of a professional financial operation, *to steal* or *to decide* are simply verbs of action, but *to commit theft* and *to intend* include an evaluation of the act and the perpetrator of the act, *proof* sounds modest, but *evidence* gives the impression of a complete, ordered and interpreted list of all the circumstances that matter.

As can be seen, the construction and reinforcement of a culture of distance and dominance by state institutions is a multi-faceted process. It can be a conscious practice or an unconscious reproduction of communication patterns and rituals to which the institutional sender is accustomed. However, as a result of these actions barriers and the deepening of the sense of contrast between the ‘distinguished’ authority and the ‘ordinary’ man are created.

#### 4.2 *Disregarding the perceptive capacity of the recipient as a sign of discrimination*

According to the definition of linguistic human rights proposed by Mancini/de Witte (2008: 247 f.), one of the most important values is the right to require someone to communicate in an intelligible language. In particular, this applies to state authorities that have to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and equally in their interactions with authorities. As Varennes (2001: 16) has pointed out, fundamental human rights and in particular the principle of non-discrimination are at the root of language rights.

The principles of language simplification relating to the removal of “manifestations of power” from official texts are also intended to counteract communicative discrimination. Elements emphasizing the hegemony of the state apparatus may be defined as linguistic insignnia of power depreciating the ‘weaker’ recipient and neglecting their needs. This manifests itself in the conscious and unconscious introduction of unequal access to legal information through the creation of messages that, as a rule, are comprehensible only to those with substantive preparation and/or professional experience. Thus, if the fact whether a citizen understands the content of a document/information depends on chance (e. g., they has already been a party in a similar case), luck (e. g., they has a degree in law or a related field), or the occasional support they receives (e. g., someone from their family or friends help them interpret the text), then we are undoubtedly dealing with discrimination against a fundamental group of recipients – the

non-professional participants of the discourse. And it is the non-professional, ordinary participant of proceedings in offices or parties to court trials that should be given special care by the state authorities. The rules of *plain language* highlighting this problem are in particular those which raise the need to put oneself in the place of the recipient, and thus to construct documents taking into account the perceptive capabilities of the intended recipients. Documents or statements formulated as if they were addressed to experts and not to ordinary citizens are a sign of disregard for the needs of society, which ultimately leads to discrimination on the basis of education. One of the clearest examples of this form of ignoring non-professional participants in interactions is the frequent use of hermetic nomenclature, full of difficult terms, which for the average person can be a barrier to understanding the content (e. g., *counterclaim*; *direct evidence*; *felony*; *misdemeanor*; *plea deal*) or at least cause concern as to whether they have interpreted a particular word or phrase correctly, e. g., *expiration* instead of *end*; *expertise* instead of *ability*; *disseminate* instead of *give/issue/pass/send*, etc. It is also worth mentioning that legal terminology is only one of the problems of court and official documents, as, depending on the subject matter of the case, they contain terms from countless areas of life, including medicine, forensic medicine, psychology, agriculture, biology, economics and many others. All this can make a document impossible to decode in real life conditions for the average language user.

Another issue, which is also noted in the plain language rules as making it difficult to read and properly interpret official texts, is the use of foreign language expressions. If, in addition, such passages come from a dead language, i. e. Latin, understanding the document requires the use of a dictionary of foreign words, as it is difficult to expect anyone to be fluent in Latin. This is a complex problem as Latinisms may appear in texts in various functions, e. g., as ornaments or equivalents of native words (e. g., *elocutio*; *sine qua non*; *court a quo*) or as whole sentence constructions, e. g., legal maxims (e. g., *Ignorantia iuris nocet*; *Nemo iudex in causa sua*). Although the latter have the potential to transpose plain judgement into educational instruction, they must be understandable for the recipient, i. e. given in the native language. Otherwise they are reduced to the “paradox of Elektra” (Seuren 2005: 86–88), i. e. what is or could be intelligible ceases to be intelligible, because in the foreign-language variant it is invisible and becomes another barrier to overcome on the way to understanding the message. From a pragmatic and utilitarian point of view, the use of words, expressions and texts in a foreign language has no substantive justification, because a text ‘ornamented’ with them makes access to legal information more difficult by leading to information overload in the recipient and, as a result, discouraging them from trying to understand the words and intentions of the sender.

The information overload referred to in the plain language rules was also presented as a communication aberration. It is evidenced, for example, by recommendations to include the most important information and omit the information that is of no importance to the recipient, as well as advice to stick to the point, order the information, avoid digressions and very long sentences. This is a prerequisite to ensure that an excess of cognitively empty text does not turn a message/document into a jumble of words through which one has to cut in order to extract what really matters. Of course, it may be assumed that those directly involved in a particular official or court case will try to determine the essence of unclear messages, but it is worth recalling at this point the thesis of Petty/Cacioppo (1986a, 1986b) which states that a large number of complex messages will cause discourse participants with the strongest cognitive motivation to decode them, while others will give up. This is also supported by the concept of social attitudes (Sherif/Cantril 1947, Sherif/Sherif/Nebergall 1965), according to which the

motivation to determine the meaning of a message is directly proportional to the commitment to the issue. The assumption, however, that if someone cares a great deal about understanding a message, they will go to great lengths and put a lot of effort into the process of understanding it, is a blatant disregard for maintaining democratic and ethical standards (Willerton 2015) in office-citizen communication.

On the basis of the above reflections, it can be concluded that the creation of complex messages with an unnatural lexical layer becomes a source of cognitive exclusion. Cognitive exclusion in this case is the limitation of human and civil rights to obtain reliable legal information enabling a person to assert and defend their rights. In other words, it is building a 'glass ceiling' of symbolic violence by using language that, instead of explaining the reality to the recipient, complicates it. It is a kind of discrimination against the needs of non-professional participants in communication, leading in consequence to their alienation.

## 5 Conclusions

The article presents reflections on the influence of conventions of social coexistence on the quality of communication of its members. One such communication convention includes official contacts between authorities and citizens. For this reason, the main part of the article is devoted to the description of the plain language rules from the perspective of their potential to democratize language in official contacts and highlight the incompatibility of official texts with social needs. The perspective adopted made it possible to identify the basic communication barriers in the contacts between authorities and citizens from the plain language rules.

First of all, it was noted that some of the plain language rules are aimed at limiting the uncontrolled manifestation of the privileged position of authorities (e. g., manneristic stylization of speech). Rules were also formulated addressing the need for writing that does not limit citizens' access to legal information.

The trends observed were assigned to two main categories: countering practices of distance and domination and countering practices of discrimination and confusion. It was found that practices of distance and domination consist in reinforcing the asymmetrical relationship between public institutions and citizens by emphasizing the dominant role of institutions. It was shown that the rituals of distance and domination include the use of sophisticated vocabulary, complicated and unnatural grammatical constructions, or a specific style of formulating messages (from formalistic, through technocratic, to emphatic). On the other hand, as far as the practices of discrimination and confusion are concerned, it was found that they generally referred to the formulation of texts without taking into account the perceptive capabilities of the recipient. This manifested itself in the use of hermetic nomenclature saturated with difficult terms, the construction of very long sentences, the introduction of foreign expressions into the text or unnecessary digressions. It has been shown that such actions lead to information overload and, in extreme cases, to cognitive exclusion.

A review of the rules of language simplification in terms of their sociolinguistic value revealed that the spectrum of rituals perpetuating inequalities between participants in institutional discourses is extremely wide. In turn, the plain language rules themselves have highlighted the incompatibility of official texts with social needs. Institutional documents (legal, juridical, official) have acquired such a number of manneristic linguistic customs that they tend to complicate rather than clarify reality.



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# Les langues de spécialité en France : vers une transdisciplinarité pratique

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**Abstract** Recent improvements in information technologies, together with the social and economic changes affecting societies and the world of work today, make it necessary for the French higher education sector to consider the teaching practices of specialised languages (or LSPs) as a particular form of transdisciplinarity. Based on the exploratory survey of open-ended questionnaires, the present contribution aims to define the notion of « borrowed knowledge » characterising the teachers of specialised languages' expert knowledge by analysing the French higher education context and its evolution of teaching practices since the 1970s. After giving a general overview of such a context in part one, part two discusses the theoretical foundation of the construct of « borrowed knowledge » and its operative dimension. Part three will then describe, analyse and discuss the qualitative exploration of teaching practices in LSP and its didactic make-up explored in a questionnaire survey conducted in two French universities. It combines a discussion about didactic expertise in language teaching and its links with transdisciplinarity, taking language biographies into account.

**Keywords** borrowed knowledge, French higher education, LSP, teaching practices, transdisciplinarity

## 1 Introduction

Selon Hugh G. Petrie, la transdisciplinarité se définit comme « (the) desirability of the integration of knowledge into a meaningful whole » (Petrie 1992 : 305). Dans l'enseignement supérieur et la recherche, elle s'oppose structurellement à l'approche disciplinaire qui génère une spécialisation grandissante des domaines de recherche et du savoir, et, au sein des universités, une juxtaposition de disciplines cloisonnées et centrées sur les méthodes et les objets qui ont contribué à leur émergence dans leur enseignement (Lahire 2012). Petrie, s'inspirant de Dewey (1938) défend par ailleurs l'idée selon laquelle la transdisciplinarité serait une réponse collaborative aux problèmes « du monde réel » qu'il s'agit d'appréhender comme des phénomènes, des situations complexes où savoir et expérience sont mêlés (Dewey 1938 : 5). En d'autres termes, la transdisciplinarité doit remplir des objectifs pratiques et utiles au bien commun, et permet de considérer toute question ou problème impliquant le développement du savoir comme un enjeu sociétal englobant une grande diversité d'acteurs et d'interactions. Il s'agit là d'une perspective engageante pour l'enseignement supérieur, dont la mission serait plus proche des préoccupations actuelles en matière de professionnalisation des formations. Quant à la différence entre inter- et transdisciplinarité, elle tient au degré d'intégration des approches, qui est plus grand, plus englobant, dans le cas de la transdisciplinarité (Petrie 1992), d'autres chercheurs estimant d'ailleurs que la réflexion sur l'interdisciplinarité est un préalable

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incontournable (Thompson-Klein 1990). La raison invoquée tient au caractère modélisateur de l'interdisciplinarité s'agissant du processus d'intégration des disciplines à la fois d'un point de vue épistémologique dans le cadre d'une réflexion sur la constitution des savoirs, et d'un point de vue pragmatique dans celui de l'enseignement-apprentissage interdisciplinaire.

L'intégration de deux ou plusieurs disciplines est un phénomène récent en France dans le domaine des ALL-SHS<sup>1</sup> au sein de formations comme, par exemple, le droit et la littérature, les sciences et la littérature, l'inclusion des *soft skills* (expression souvent traduite en français par « savoir-être » ou « compétences relationnelles ») dans les cursus d'ingénieurs<sup>2</sup>, à l'instar des programmes interdisciplinaires des universités anglophones. Leur point commun est une structure encourageant le travail collaboratif des enseignants, l'ouverture d'esprit des étudiants et leur adaptation à des environnements professionnels et humains, mais les efforts de collaboration entre enseignants-chercheurs relevant de différentes disciplines n'est pas la norme en France. Doit-on pour autant éliminer la transdisciplinarité du paysage universitaire ? Ne peut-on pas tenter d'en élargir la portée ? Car, certes, si la transdisciplinarité se coconstruit en permanence, si elle dépend largement d'une démarche commune aux chercheurs et aux enseignants, elle dépend aussi de l'adoption par l'enseignant ou le chercheur des caractéristiques fondamentales d'une telle démarche dépassant la compartimentalisation disciplinaire (Charaudeau 2010)<sup>3</sup>. La plus importante d'entre elles consiste en la capacité à agencer les savoirs comme on agence les concepts (Deleuze/Guattari 1995 : 21–38) mais aussi en la capacité à rendre l'agencement efficace, afin de résoudre un problème ou de répondre à une question, ce qui pourrait décrire de manière générale l'activité des enseignants de « langues pour spécialistes d'autres disciplines » (connu sous l'acronyme *Lansad*).

L'objectif de la présente contribution est de montrer que la transdisciplinarité est un élément important dans l'activité professionnelle de ces enseignants, à condition de la considérer comme un agencement horizontal, mêlant des savoirs de nature et de statut différents. En particulier, nous nous intéresserons à la manière dont ces enseignants intègrent à leur pratique les savoirs, ou thématiques, des disciplines d'adossement de leurs cours de langue en les associant aux savoirs académiques ou professionnels acquis durant leur formation universitaire ou professionnelle, sanctionnant ainsi le rôle de l'expérience dans la constitution de ce savoir inter et transdisciplinaire (Perrenoud 1998). Nous nous baserons pour cela sur les résultats d'une enquête qualitative pilote faite auprès d'enseignants de langues des universités de Toulouse Capitole et le Centre de Langues de l'Université Paris 8 exerçant tous dans le secteur Lansad et notamment en anglais de spécialité. Cette enquête constitue la première étape d'un projet de recherche SAVEMP (acronyme de « Savoir Emprunté ») qui vise à identifier les éléments constitutifs du savoir des enseignants de langues de spécialité en France, en postulant la nature transdisciplinaire de ce dernier.

La première partie (section 2) sera consacrée, d'une part à des éléments de contexte (émergence et développement du secteur Lansad dans l'environnement universitaire français), la deuxième à la présentation théorique de la notion de *savoir emprunté* qui définit le savoir transdisciplinaire et asymétrique de ces enseignants de langue dite *de spécialité* (section 3). La troisième partie traitera, à partir des données issues de l'enquête, des différentes visions

<sup>1</sup> Arts-Lettres et Langues-Sciences Humaines et Sociales.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.enseeiht.fr/fr/formation/formation-ingenieur/soft-skills-center.html> (9.10.2021).

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.pedagogie.ac-nantes.fr/servlet/com.univ.collaboratif.util.LectureFichiergw?\\_FICHER=1424145648529](https://www.pedagogie.ac-nantes.fr/servlet/com.univ.collaboratif.util.LectureFichiergw?_FICHER=1424145648529) (9.10.2021).

et stratégies des répondants dans la constitution de ce *savoir emprunté*, puis de la manière dont ce savoir est, dans leur esprit, lié à la transdisciplinarité et à la légitimité qu'ils tirent de leur fonction et de leurs missions confrontées à leur environnement professionnel (section 4). Enfin, nous esquisserons des pistes de réflexion pour assurer la pérennité de la recherche en formation dans ce domaine d'activité professionnelle (section 5).

## 2 Cartographie du secteur Lansad et des langues de spécialité en France

La loi Faure de 1968<sup>4</sup> a profondément réformé l'enseignement supérieur en France en transformant son mode de gouvernance et en modifiant l'offre de formation dans le but de développer une université pluridisciplinaire, accessible à tous. La loi stipule que l'université française est pluridisciplinaire, et généralise l'enseignement d'une langue vivante étrangère dans toutes les filières post-baccalauréat hors filières langues. Ces enseignements furent artificiellement regroupés par défaut sous l'acronyme Lansad, afin de les distinguer des enseignements des filières spécialisées en langues, dont les formations demeurent différentes des autres, qui sera examiné en premier lieu. Ce tournant institutionnel coïncide par ailleurs avec une forte augmentation du nombre d'étudiants inscrits à l'université, ce qui a entraîné une réflexion de fond autour des thématiques suivantes : la professionnalisation des parcours, l'internationalisation des formations universitaires, encadrées par la législation, et la formation des enseignants de langues, en particulier d'anglais, que nous contextualiserons en un deuxième temps.

### 2.1 Genèse du secteur Lansad et de l'enseignement des langues de spécialité

L'importante croissance de l'enseignement des langues vivantes du secteur Lansad en France mérite sans doute que l'on rappelle les circonstances institutionnelles de son émergence. Dès 1966, les Instituts Universitaires de Technologie (IUT) proposaient des parcours professionnalisants en deux ans permettant une insertion directe des diplômés dans le monde du travail, auxquels étaient intégrés des enseignements de langue, particulièrement en anglais, reconnue comme langue des échanges internationaux. La demande institutionnelle en enseignement des langues s'est accrue avec le tournant de la massification de l'enseignement supérieur et la professionnalisation des parcours à partir des années 1990. L'acronyme *Lansad*, créé pour distinguer les besoins langagiers des étudiants spécialistes en langues et ceux des autres disciplines, s'est peu à peu généralisé dans le langage institutionnel du recrutement des enseignements de langues pour d'autres disciplines et aussi pour tracer une démarcation nette entre les filières LLCER<sup>5</sup> et LEA<sup>6</sup> et le secteur Lansad. L'enseignement des langues dans ce dernier s'adresse à des étudiants engagés dans des parcours de formation et de spécialisation qui sont éloignés des langues. La demande de ces enseignements est motivée avant tout par le contexte mondialisé des échanges commerciaux, culturels et scientifiques, de la formation et de la demande croissante de la mobilité internationale (Teichler 2017) et de l'employabilité des jeunes diplômés dans le contexte français de l'enseignement supérieur (O'Connell 2019). Certains chercheurs déplorent cependant que ce bouleversement progressif de l'offre de formation en

<sup>4</sup> Loi n°68-978 du 12 novembre 1968 DITE EDGAR FAURE D'ORIENTATION DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPERIEUR. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000000693185/> (19.08.2022).

<sup>5</sup> Langues, Littératures et Civilisations Étrangères et Régionales.

<sup>6</sup> Langues Étrangères Appliquées.

langues n'ait pas été accompagné d'instructions et d'aide de la part de l'institution (Van der Yeught 2014). Les enseignants de langue ont donc globalement orienté leurs enseignements vers une approche communicative, susceptible de répondre aux besoins des étudiants ainsi que de leurs futurs recruteurs. Cependant, l'idée selon laquelle chaque communauté professionnelle était dotée d'une langue spécialisée, s'est peu à peu imposée aux enseignants et aux chercheurs (Petit 2002 : 1–3). Cela peut expliquer la montée en puissance des demandes de spécialisation du fait que les étudiants de filières hors spécialisation en langues, ainsi que les responsables des formations, sont de plus en plus conscients de l'apport spécialisé et disciplinaire que les étudiants devront acquérir. Dans cette perspective, l'enseignement des langues en Lansad doit intégrer des compétences spécialisées ou « fortement contextualisées » (Wozniak/Millot 2016) qui préparent les étudiants à s'insérer dans le monde du travail.

## 2.2 Professionnalisation des parcours

La question de la professionnalisation est fortement ancrée dans les formations depuis le fractionnement des disciplines et les refontes successives de l'université, menées depuis les années 1980. Le législateur rend l'université accessible au plus grand nombre des étudiants bacheliers y compris ceux des filières techniques (loi LRU de 2007<sup>7</sup>), entendue comme la démocratisation de l'université à grande échelle, et a mis l'insertion professionnelle au cœur des missions de l'université, au même titre que la formation ou la recherche. Quant à la loi dite Fioraso de 2013<sup>8</sup>, elle a renforcé l'axe de la spécialisation, devenue une prérogative de l'université et a introduit le paradigme des compétences, visant à optimiser les acquis des savoirs et savoir-faire des étudiants. Elle a également autorisé le recours à l'anglais comme langue d'enseignement. Cette orientation procède de la nécessité de préparer au mieux les étudiants au marché de travail. L'employabilité des étudiants, futurs travailleurs, devient un cadre qui structure les contenus des cours et les objectifs didactiques. Ainsi, l'orientation professionnelle, les multiples dispositifs des stages en entreprise et/ou en alternance et l'incitation à l'insertion professionnelle deviennent des priorités des missions de formation à l'université :

L'atténuation du cloisonnement entre expériences universitaire et professionnelle, en organisant des allers retours entre les moments d'emploi et de formation, serait de nature à améliorer les conditions d'insertion professionnelle. (Piozin et al. 2020)

Le tournant de la professionnalisation des formations à l'université en France a bouleversé profondément l'enseignement/apprentissage des langues-cultures. C'est en ce sens que la notion de *langue de spécialité* (LSP) a évolué pour intégrer de nouveaux besoins langagiers et de nouvelles pratiques didactiques. Le recours aux langues de spécialités dans les années 1970 désignait les besoins de communication en milieux professionnels dans le but de cibler une communication efficace :

<sup>7</sup> LOI no 2007-1199 du 10 août 2007 relative aux Libertés et Responsabilités des Universités. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000824315/> (13.08.2022).

<sup>8</sup> LOI n° 2013-660 du 22 juillet 2013 relative à l'enseignement supérieur et à la recherche. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000027735009/> (13.08.2022).

Expression générique pour désigner les langues utilisées dans des situations de communication (orales ou écrites) qui impliquent la transmission d'une information relevant d'un champ d'expérience particulier. (Galisson/Coste 1976 : 511)

Toutefois, il n'existe pas aujourd'hui à proprement parler de consensus sur la définition de la LSP comme objet de recherche et d'enseignement, plutôt des définitions qui renvoient à des contextes et des réalités professionnelles et didactiques différentes. Si l'appellation générique de LSP est d'abord apparue dès la fin des années 1960 avec Swales (1985) dans le monde anglophone, elle a fait son entrée en France chez les anglicistes, dont Petit (2002 : 1–3) :

L'anglais de spécialité est la branche de l'anglistique qui traite de la langue, du discours et de la culture des communautés professionnelles et groupes sociaux spécialisés anglophones et de l'enseignement de cet objet.

Depuis cette appellation générique différenciée de la langue « générale », les manières d'aborder la LSP se sont multipliées, les contenus se sont diversifiés, assortis d'un savoir de plus en plus interdisciplinaire. La LSP se décline en langues de spécialités, recouvrant divers domaines des sciences fondamentales et des sciences humaines et sociales (médecine, physique ou encore droit et sociologie). Bien que l'enseignement spécialisé se soit forgé une didactique appropriée dans plusieurs langues (Van der Yeught 2014), sa discipline de recherche est encore récente et demeure à explorer. De manière générale, les savoirs construits ou mobilisés par les langues de spécialité en France font état de nombreuses définitions (Rondeau 1984, Lérat 1995, Cabré/Cormier/Humbley 1998, Petit 2002 et Van der Yeught 2016) qui attestent de l'évolution et de la transformation des approches théoriques, des méthodes et des contenus des enseignements des LSP.

### 2.3 *L'internationalisation des formations*

Il s'agit d'une démarche d'harmonisation et d'intégration de parcours universitaires au niveau européen dont l'objectif est de promouvoir la mobilité des étudiants, des enseignants et des personnels administratifs au sein des universités européennes. Le Processus de Bologne, lancé en 1998 par la Déclaration de la Sorbonne, restructure progressivement l'écosystème universitaire européen en mettant en place l'Espace Européen de l'Enseignement Supérieur (EEES) en 2010. Cet ensemble regroupe les pays membres du Conseil de l'Europe dans un espace commun et économiquement compétitif<sup>9</sup>. Plus récemment, le Ministère de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche (MESRI) a incité les établissements à créer des partenariats entre universités européennes, sur le principe de la mutualisation des offres de formation. Les universités, regroupées autour de thématiques ou de projets, sont invitées à accueillir des étudiants des universités partenaires en abondant au catalogue commun des formations des modules présentés et enseignés en anglais. Par ailleurs, l'anglais est indispensable dans les filières scientifiques, notamment en recherche (langue internationale de la diffusion de la recherche et des appels à projets européens et internationaux) même si le Conseil de l'Europe préconise qu'une place importante soit accordée aux langues mineures dans les enseignements/apprentissages. Il faut dire que l'anglais n'est plus vraiment considéré comme une langue étrangère parmi d'autres,

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/fr/espace-europeen-de-l-enseignement-superieur-eees-51338> (15.12.2022).

tant son enseignement se généralise depuis le cycle primaire jusqu'en fin d'études secondaires, où il fait l'objet d'une première certification. D'un point de vue organisationnel, les départements des langues ou les centres de langues (CDL) gèrent le volet enseignement et se trouvent parfois confrontés à l'hétérogénéité des niveaux de langues des étudiants et à la difficulté de créer des groupes de niveaux par filière. Ces structures sont transversales de par leur accueil de publics de filières différentes, ayant des profils cognitifs variés. Le décloisonnement entre les filières et les langues a engendré une caractérisation des apprentissages dans le secteur Lansad selon les disciplines (Poteaux 2015).

#### *2.4 La formation des enseignants de LSP*

Si les besoins langagiers évolutifs en Lansad ont modifié la nature des enseignements et les modalités de construction des savoirs en langues-cultures, peu de recherches portent sur la professionnalisation des enseignants. Et pourtant, du point de vue d'une approche théorique qui prend appui sur le continuum sujet-savoir dans le champ de la didactique, les transformations vécues par tous les acteurs dans ce domaine ont entraîné des changements importants sur l'engagement et les missions d'enseignement et/ou de recherche en langues-cultures de spécialité. La recherche en didactique des LSP, qui s'inscrit ici dans le champ des sciences en éducation, s'est davantage focalisée sur les futurs besoins professionnels des apprenants et n'a pas pris la mesure de ce que ce type d'enseignement requiert comme engagement et remise en question épistémique constante de la part des enseignants, quand bien même ils n'auraient reçu aucune formation pour faire face à des besoins et public hétérogènes en constante évolution. La professionnalisation des apprenants a toujours été mise en avant par l'approche didactique de la recherche en LSP et celle-ci, en intégrant la recherche anglophone et la linguistique appliquée, s'est distinguée par son intérêt pour la caractérisation des savoirs spécialisés et des domaines de spécialisation. La formation des enseignants n'était pas au cœur des préoccupations, nous pouvons nous demander si cette mise à l'écart ou plutôt le scepticisme à l'égard de cette question ne provient pas en partie des représentations sociales et contrastées sur l'enseignement en secteur Lansad. Wozniak/Millot (2016) ont insisté sur la nécessité de généraliser la formation aux langues de spécialité dès la formation initiale des futurs enseignants de langue. Par ailleurs, l'autonomisation des apprenants montre l'importance de leur implication dans un processus d'apprentissage conscientisant, s'agissant des attentes évolutives du monde du travail et de l'intérêt à envisager leurs parcours dans un continuum de formation. D'ailleurs, l'Éducation et la Formation Tout au Long de la Vie (EFTLV) leur est présentée selon cette perspective. Elle devient de surcroît un leitmotiv intégré aux apprentissages des langues-cultures étrangères. Cela participe, d'une part, à l'hybridation des contenus des formations et, d'autre part, multiplie les perspectives diversifiées de parcours de formation au sein de l'université. L'évolution des parcours individuels et l'introduction, par exemple, de la Validation des Acquis d'Expérience (VAE)<sup>10</sup> accentue l'hétérogénéité du public des apprenants en Lansad.

Ces évolutions constantes des besoins en langues et des profils du public de ce secteur exigent de la part des enseignants une plus grande réactivité et disponibilité pour ajuster en per-

<sup>10</sup> La validation des acquis de l'expérience (VAE) permet, à toute personne engagée dans la vie active, d'obtenir une certification professionnelle par la validation de son expérience acquise dans le cadre d'une activité professionnelle et/ou extra-professionnelle. <https://travail-emploi.gouv.fr/formation-professionnelle/certification-competences-pro/vae> (17.12.2022).



manence les contenus des cours et des activités pédagogiques. Dans cette perspective, la transversalité s'accroît et interroge la nature même de la transdisciplinarité à l'œuvre aujourd'hui.

### 3 Un objet de recherche et un construit didactique hybride

#### 3.1 De la LSP vers le savoir emprunté des enseignants de langue

La spécificité de la langue de spécialité correspond au fait qu'elle dépend des domaines de spécialité qui lui servent de référence dans ses définitions, ses contenus d'enseignement et d'apprentissage. C'est en ce sens qu'elle est un construit, parce qu'elle inclut la didactique des LSP à la fois dans sa spécificité de didactique autonome et dans son interdépendance à l'égard des disciplines contributrices notamment la linguistique appliquée qui lui a donné une assise conceptuelle. La langue de spécialité est par ailleurs indissociable des situations mises en œuvre dans un processus d'apprentissage et elle ne peut en être détachée (O'Connell 2019). C'est donc au sein de la didactique en tant que domaine de recherche que prend sens la modélisation des approches didactiques ou l'analyse de situations didactiques impliquant les LSP. La discipline peut les structurer en se forgeant un cadre théorique ouvert et transdisciplinaire, soit par emprunt aux concepts d'autres disciplines soit par coconstruction de modèles propres. C'est ce que l'on observe actuellement dans le champ de la LSP en France où une clarification théorique et méthodologique est nécessaire. En effet, l'accroissement de la demande en enseignement de LSP exige des enseignants de langue qu'ils acquièrent un savoir en lien avec la discipline d'adossment de ses cours, soit par expérience, soit par partage et collaboration, ou en auto-formation, ou plutôt qu'ils « l'empruntent » à un domaine disciplinaire qu'ils connaissent peu, sauf exception.

#### 3.2 Le savoir emprunté des enseignants de langue de spécialité

L'expression fait référence à un article de Chevallard (2006), didacticien des mathématiques et pionnier en France de la Théorie Anthropologique du Didactique (TAD). Il postule que le didacticien doit pouvoir s'émanciper des contraintes que fait peser sur lui l'institution scolaire et universitaire afin de repenser son enseignement au-delà des barrières disciplinaires issues de l'organisation de l'Ecole<sup>11</sup>. Pour cela, il convenait de définir la notion de savoir, qui se décline en savoir savant, issu de la recherche académique, et se transpose, d'une part, en savoir à enseigner (transposition externe, figurée par le programme scolaire) et savoir enseigné dans la salle de cours (ou transposition interne), d'autre part (Chevallard 1985, Colomb 1986). Ce phénomène de transposition didactique s'analyse en termes de praxéologie car il faut répondre à la question du 'comment faire pour ?' (Chevallard 1999 : 8). Chevallard distingue un bloc *pratico-technique* associant la tâche T et la technique  $\tau$  pour y parvenir, et un bloc *technologico-théorique* où la théorie  $\Theta$  justifie la technologie  $\theta$ , discours raisonné sur la technique. Ainsi le binôme  $[\Theta/\theta]$  correspond-il à un savoir, et le bloc  $[\tau/T]$  à un savoir-faire. Le processus ainsi décrit semble aller de soi dès lors que le passage du savoir savant vers le savoir enseigné, par exemple, se produit dans un continuum où l'enseignant est à la fois acteur de la recherche et enseignant dans son domaine disciplinaire. Que se passe-t-il lorsqu'un en-

<sup>11</sup> <https://ardm.eu/qui-sommes-nous-who-are-we-quienes-somos/yves-chevallard-la-theorie-anthropologique-du-didactique/> (22.09.2021).

seignant, exerçant dans l'enseignement supérieur en France, enseigne quelque chose qu'il ne connaît que très peu, et pour laquelle il n'a reçu aucune formation préalable, car c'est ainsi que l'on peut sommairement définir le *savoir emprunté* ? Peut-il le faire de manière efficace pour ses apprenants et comment ? Qu'en retire-t-il en termes de légitimité de son savoir et de ses enseignements (Chevallard 2006) ? Au-delà du caractère provocateur de la formulation, cette interrogation prend tout son sens s'agissant de l'enseignement des LSP, où des enseignants de langue doivent concevoir un contenu et des dispositifs d'enseignement d'une langue dans un domaine inconnu. Si la question de la formation à ces enseignements particuliers est l'axe de réflexion du présent article, elle se pose avant tout en termes d'acquisition d'un savoir singulier, le *savoir emprunté* à une autre discipline dans le cadre de l'enseignement d'une langue que l'on définira et caractérisera dans les quatre sections suivantes.

### 3.2.1 *Un savoir doublement asymétrique*

Contrairement au spécialiste d'une discipline universitaire qui maîtrise la chaîne du savoir jusqu'à son enseignement, le savoir emprunté suppose au contraire une dissymétrie entre le savoir savant, issu de la formation initiale de l'enseignant dans le domaine des langues et des cultures associées, et le savoir disciplinaire qui sert d'adossement au cours de langue, caractéristique principale de l'enseignement d'une LSP. Par ailleurs, il est assez fréquent que le public étudiant soit perçu par les enseignants de langue comme plus compétent qu'eux dans leur domaine disciplinaire (Isani 1993), ce qui modifie les représentations de leur statut et de leur mission. Les enseignants de LSP interviennent souvent dans plusieurs filières, ce qui limite d'autant leur champ de compétence dans une discipline de spécialité. Dans un environnement universitaire où dominent certaines filières et des enseignants-chercheurs très spécialisés dans leur domaine, les enseignants de langue se sentent perçus comme des généralistes à la mission mal définie et mal connue, ce dont témoigne le questionnaire analysé dans la deuxième partie. Par ailleurs, le fait de ne pas enseigner leur spécialité, adossée ou non à la recherche, pose aussi la question de la pertinence de leurs savoirs 'savants', universitaires dans un cadre d'enseignement comme le Lansad.

### 3.2.2 *Un savoir contextualisé*

La difficulté que pose l'étude des LSP est leur grande diversité, associées qu'elles sont à des mondes, cultures et pratiques professionnelles identifiables nécessitant la maîtrise d'une langue outil de communication singulière et dotées de normes d'usage et d'une terminologie technique.

Dans ce contexte, la connaissance du milieu professionnel par l'enseignant de LSP offre une aide incomparable. Or, il arrive bien souvent que l'enseignant en sache peu sur la profession, ses enjeux, ou les lieux concrets dans lesquels les activités s'effectuent et où interagissent les salariés. Cependant, on peut avoir accès à la langue grâce à la linguistique appliquée, en particulier l'analyse de discours (Charret Del Bove/Millot/Wozniak 2017), ainsi que par les pratiques sociales (Bhatia/Jones/Flowerdew 2008). L'enseignant se repose alors sur des biais cognitifs. Son rapport au contenu spécialisé serait donc, par hypothèse, conditionné par le savoir acquis lors de la formation initiale universitaire, tout comme son approche didactique le serait par le modèle d'enseignement de sa discipline. Par ailleurs, les enseignants de LSP interviennent souvent de manière transversale dans plusieurs filières ; à cela s'ajoute le nombre

limité d'heures affectées aux LSP dans les maquettes. La stratégie de l'enseignant correspond donc à une exigence d'économie de moyens et de structuration des enseignements autour de la langue, dans la mesure où il dispose d'un réservoir de type d'activités disponibles qu'il s'efforcera de transposer dans un contexte spécialisé. Mais cela ne dit rien de la manière dont le contenu spécialisé sera intégré au savoir expert de l'enseignant de langue.

### 3.2.3 *Un savoir agencé et rhizomatique*

Si un enseignant de langue peut mobiliser un « savoir-enseigner » issu de la formation dispensée en lien avec le concours de recrutement (Capes ou agrégation), il doit encore construire un savoir spécialisé à visée d'enseignement, et qui correspond dans l'ensemble à la thématique du cours pour un public universitaire. Cet objectif principal s'agence avec d'autres objectifs connexes comme le désir de faire connaître une culture, au sens large. Quels supports, quelle stratégie adopter pour satisfaire au mieux ces exigences articulées à l'acquisition de compétences au sens du CECRL dans un domaine linguistique spécialisé, doté d'une culture professionnelle ou académique ? En fonction des priorités identifiées par l'enseignant, un agencement de supports différents, écrits, visuels et/ou oraux s'articuleront dans une séquence de cours. Mais comment l'enseignant se dote-t-il des éléments du savoir disciplinaire spécialisé nécessaires à son cours, quel rapport entretient-il avec ce savoir auquel il emprunte son matériau pédagogique ? La difficulté à définir ce savoir en termes précis tient à la grande variabilité des agencements possibles qui tiennent autant à la distance de l'enseignant de LSP vis-à-vis du contenu spécialisé, ses biais cognitifs, ses représentations en matière d'identité professionnelle qu'à des facteurs plus externes que sont les contraintes institutionnelles. Si l'on ajoute l'expérience comme facteur supplémentaire, nous voyons se dessiner les contours d'un savoir hétérogène, pragmatique et centré sur les besoins perçus des apprenants, qui peut se conjuguer avec des objectifs plus classiques à l'université, comme la prise en compte de la dimension culturelle de la LSP qui en fait un autre miroir d'une société. L'agencement de ces divers éléments ne suit pas une logique linéaire fixée au préalable, tant il dépend d'éléments contextuels qui se greffent et font évoluer ce savoir-enseigner, ce qui justifie qu'on adopte à son propos le terme *rhizome* ou *rhizomatique* emprunté à Deleuze/Guatarri (1980), défini comme « système(s) acentré(s), réseau(x) d'automates finis, où la communication se fait d'un voisin à un voisin quelconque, où les tiges ou canaux ne préexistent pas » (Deleuze/Guatarri 1980 : 26). Dans une situation de constitution d'un savoir emprunté au domaine de spécialité, comment l'enseignant de LSP peut-il interagir avec des apprenants *a priori* plus savants dans leur discipline, ou des collègues spécialistes ? La question est alors de délimiter la part de ces interactions dans la construction de ce savoir.

### 3.2.4 *Un savoir partagé*

Outre la recherche de supports et de documents, l'enseignant de LSP peut bénéficier d'autres sources de savoir, d'une nature plus collaborative : les spécialistes du domaine d'adossement ainsi que les étudiants. L'enseignant se trouve alors dans une posture d'apprentissage, même partiellement, lui permettant d'enrichir son savoir tout en lui fournissant les moyens d'orienter son approche didactique pour faciliter l'acquisition par les apprenants des compétences visées, qu'elles soient culturelles, professionnelles, langagières. L'enseignant engagé dans cette démarche se considère, comme le montrera l'analyse des questionnaires, davantage comme un

médiateur qui centre son enseignement sur, et à partir de, l'apprenant. De ce fait il adopte une approche peu répandue à l'université consistant à enseigner sur les bases de savoirs empruntés, ce qui fait de lui un généraliste aux yeux des spécialistes du domaine, contrevenant à la norme de l'autorité au sens latin d'*auctoritas*, fondée sur le savoir savant spécialisé. En cours, le dispositif le plus susceptible d'agencer savoir spécialisé en langue et savoir emprunté à la spécialité doit s'appuyer sur l'effort collaboratif entre apprenants et enseignant, initiant une sorte de transaction praxéologique, que Chevallard définit comme une relation bénéfique et un savoir mis à disposition (Chevallard 2006 : 8). Considérer un apprenant, et *a fortiori*, un spécialiste de la discipline, comme des « autres plus compétents » (Vygotsky 1985 : 112), tout en étant reconnu comme l'autre plus compétent en langue introduit une dynamique d'apprentissage mutuel : enseignant de LSP et apprenants se rencontrent ainsi dans une *zone proximale de développement* (ZPD) où s'échangent les savoirs, de nature à opérer sur l'asymétrie de ces savoirs et à rétablir un équilibre propre à établir une sorte d'altérité bienveillante (Chevallard 2006 : 5) qui peut, à tout moment, être perçue comme menaçante (Chevallard 2006 : 10). Le phénomène peut s'accompagner d'un repli disciplinaire sur des praxéologies éprouvées et reconnues qui forment un territoire sécurisant mais isolant ; de fait, les échanges entre enseignants de LSP et leurs collègues de spécialité ne sont pas la norme et dépendent d'initiatives de petits groupes selon le contexte. Si l'environnement universitaire invite les chercheurs à se fédérer en laboratoires, il n'en est pas, semble-t-il, de même pour l'enseignement, qui demeure assez cloisonné selon des lignes de démarcation disciplinaires. En outre, les Unités de Formation et de Recherche (UFR) qui forment le tissu académique en France n'ont pas toutes le même rapport à la pédagogie, à la réflexion didactique sur les enseignements, ce qui permet difficilement une collaboration au minimum interdisciplinaire. La transdisciplinarité dans le contexte des LSP relève davantage d'une démarche volontaire des enseignants, qui produisent dans leurs cours un double mouvement de déterritorialisation, du territoire des études de langue vers celui de la spécialité, qui se reterritorialise sur la situation d'enseignement (O'Connell 2019 : 120). Ce faisant, s'agrègent des lectures variées, des supports jugés adéquats pour l'enseignement et de leur didactisation qui forment, avec les affects, les émotions et les interactions la base du *savoir emprunté* des enseignants de LSP.

#### 4 L'enquête pilote

##### 4.1 Contexte : le projet SAVEMP et ses objectifs

La didactique du Lansad apparaît aujourd'hui plus comme un ensemble de pratiques d'enseignement accompagné d'une solide réflexion pédagogique et scientifique que comme un champ de recherche scientifique spécifique, indépendant. Le projet interuniversitaire SAVEMP a pour objectif de définir la notion de *langue de spécialité* (LSP) dans une perspective didactique et de travailler à la construction d'une épistémologie de cette discipline (concepts, modèles, praxéologie) dans le champ de la pensée enseignante. Partant du constat qu'il s'agit d'un objet hybride, constitué du binôme langue-spécialité, on s'interrogera sur le seuil de compétences dans le domaine de spécialité à acquérir par l'enseignant de langue dans le domaine d'adossement de son cours. Pour cela, le concept de savoir emprunté est conçu comme l'ensemble des influences, des transferts en termes de supports et de transposition didactique entre les deux disciplines dont il faut identifier les points d'entrée. La littérature théorique considère la constitution d'un savoir enseignant comme un processus générique sans distinguer

les divers types de savoirs mobilisés selon le contexte institutionnel : la LSP et son secteur d'enseignement-apprentissage dédié, le Lansad, y figurent peu à ce titre, sauf à procéder par analogie (Porlan-Ariza/Toscano 1994 : 50). Les hypothèses théoriques puisées à la TAD (Chevallard 2010), aux New Literacy Studies (Gee 1998, Hamilton 2002, Fraenkel/Mbodj-Pouye 2010) et aux théorèmes de déterritorialisation (Deleuze/Guattari 1980, 1995) prenaient leurs sources dans des retours d'expériences et des discussions entre collègues, qu'il importait de formaliser. Le projet ne ciblant aucune LSP en particulier, il fallait mener une enquête de terrain à visée exploratoire dans plusieurs établissements universitaires, et auprès d'enseignants de LSP différentes. C'est ainsi qu'une collaboration s'est initiée qui concerne les trois universités de Toulouse et celle de Paris 8, qui comprend toutes les filières du domaine ALL-SHS, afin de mettre en évidence des éléments de contextes pertinents. Le projet a été initié au début de la crise sanitaire, qui en a fortement ralenti le déroulement. On se propose de présenter et d'analyser un questionnaire qualitatif partiel, diffusé entre le 15 juin et le 15 juillet 2021, auprès d'un public d'enseignants de LSP du Département des Langues et Cultures de l'Université Toulouse Capitole (droit, administration, économie) et du Centre de Langues de l'Université Paris 8, dispensant tous les cours pour les non-spécialistes, ayant chacun recueilli six réponses.

#### 4.2 Méthodologie

Le questionnaire a pour objectif de détecter la perception qu'ont les enseignants interrogés de leur mission dans le domaine des LSP et la manière dont ils construisent un savoir spécifique qu'il importe de caractériser ; un questionnaire à réponses ouvertes a été envoyé à l'ensemble des enseignants, tous statuts et langues confondus. Le public enseignant étant divers, il a semblé pertinent d'inclure des éléments de biographie langagière afin de caractériser le rapport qu'entretiennent les répondants à leur langue d'enseignement et au caractère évolutif de ces représentations dans le temps, en fonction de l'expérience professionnelle de chacun.

#### 4.3 Le questionnaire qualitatif

##### 4.3.1 Critères

Des conversations informelles renouvelées sur plusieurs années ont permis de détecter plusieurs points significatifs relatifs à la manière dont chacun se représentait sa pratique enseignante en LSP et son positionnement vis-à-vis des autres disciplines au sein de l'institution : le parcours personnel et professionnel, la question de l'intégration et de l'accompagnement des nouveaux collègues et, en corollaire la liberté pédagogique, l'existence de contraintes institutionnelles, et la question du positionnement de l'enseignant de LSP en termes de légitimité professionnelle au sein de l'établissement. Ces questionnements sont liés car l'on perçoit que le développement professionnel des enseignants consultés synthétise leurs attitudes et croyances (qui peuvent évoluer), leurs savoirs et compétences, et leur pratique pédagogique.

##### 4.3.2 Questions et attentes

La conception du questionnaire (voir annexe) intègre trois dimensions : en premier lieu la biographie linguistique des répondants, l'hypothèse étant que la relation enseignant-LVE permet de mettre à jour les motivations et les attentes autour des valeurs et représentations professi-

onnelles partagées, tout en prenant en compte l'apport personnel de l'enseignant à la relation au savoir en langue et dans d'autres disciplines ou activités (questions 1 à 4). Ensuite, un certain nombre de questions (5 à 16) interrogent la manière dont l'enseignant de LSP agence les divers savoirs afin de former ce « savoir emprunté » indispensable au processus d'enseignement, et la légitimité professionnelle qu'il en retire. Enfin (questions 17 à 20), il s'agit de voir dans quelle mesure les répondants considèrent le caractère hybride, intégrateur de leur discipline comme une démarche transdisciplinaire associant réflexion didactique et pratique pédagogique.

#### 4.4 Analyse des réponses

##### 4.4.1 Profils des répondants

- 6 répondants du Département des Langues et Cultures (R1 à R6) de l'Université Toulouse Capitole intervenant en droit et sciences politiques, en économie, en gestion/management et en Administration et Communication.
- 6 répondants du Centre de Langues de l'Université Paris 8 (R7 à R12) :

Répondant	Sexe	Langue enseignée	Nb d'années d'expérience	Statut	Langue native
R1	F	FLE	33	PRAG/PRCE	français
R2	H	anglais	22	PRAG/PRCE	anglais
R3	F	espagnol	3	Vacataire	espagnol/anglais
R4	F	espagnol	31	PRAG/PRCE	français
R5	F	anglais	12	EC	français/anglais
R6	F	anglais	15+	Contractuelle	anglais/non renseignée
R7	F	anglais	10+	PRAG	français
R8	F	anglais	12+	PRAG	français
R9	F	italien	8+	MCF	français
R10	F	anglais	12+	Vacataire	anglais/non renseignée
R11	F	anglais	5	Vacataire	anglais
R12	F	anglais	10+	Contractuelle	anglais/non renseignée

Tableau 1 : Profils des répondants

##### 4.4.2 Les biographies langagières et les représentations professionnelles (Q1 à Q4)

Q1 : Les répondants citent le plus souvent l'intérêt personnel pour une langue et une culture (R2, R4, R6) ; si la langue d'enseignement peut changer (R1, R2, R4, R6), le passage d'une langue à l'autre ne change pas ce rapport initial (R6, R12). D'autres évoquent un contexte bilingue et biculturel (R3, R5, R11), associé à des objectifs professionnels (R5) ou la volonté de faire partager une telle expérience (R3, R9, R10).

Q2 : La plupart des répondants ont suivi un parcours dans l'enseignement en formation initiale, cette carrière ayant pu être adoptée plus tardivement, mais pas par défaut (R6). Cette motivation initiale ne semble pas avoir diminué (R1, R4, R6) mais s'affirme dans le temps com-

me un désir de transmettre tout en restant dans une zone de confort (R3, R6) et de se former (R3, R11) au contact des étudiants et des collègues, ce qui constitue aussi un enrichissement culturel (R1, R10).

Q3-a : Peu de répondants ont suivi un cursus bi-disciplinaire (R6, R5, R3, R8, R11, R12), mais beaucoup insistent sur le caractère pluridisciplinaire de leur cursus (R4, R2, R6) qui leur a apporté aide et sécurité disciplinaire.

Q3-b : Les parcours professionnels sont variés, mais principalement associés à des activités d'enseignement et de formation dans le secteur public ou privé (R1, R3, R6, R11, R12), avec parfois des incursions dans la rédaction de documents technique (R2) ou la traduction (R3, R10). Certains ont changé d'orientation professionnelle (R5), d'autres ont suivi une carrière d'enseignant classique par le biais des concours de recrutement avant d'entrer dans l'Enseignement Supérieur (R4, R9, R10). La majorité estime par ailleurs que l'expérience professionnelle hors les murs de l'université leur a été profitable dans le cadre de leur enseignement (R9).

Q4 : Les allophones se distinguent des francophones parce qu'ils abordent l'enseignement supérieur en France comme une expérience nouvelle (R2, R3, R8, R11, R12), un contexte inconnu ; pour les francophones, l'université est associée à la spécialisation des enseignements disciplinaires, qui ne s'applique pas aux langues (R4, R9), même si une évolution vers davantage de spécialisation est constatée. D'autres considèrent que l'enseignement est affaire d'expérience (R5, R12). En revanche, beaucoup font référence à la motivation des étudiants et à la place importante de l'anglais dans la professionnalisation (R2) et des thématiques d'actualité, facteurs d'ouverture sur le monde (R3, R7, R10). Enfin, il s'agit d'un enseignement centré sur les besoins des étudiants dans une variété de contextes, professionnels ou informels (R1, R9), qui donne l'orientation pédagogique et thématique des cours.

#### 4.4.3 La formation du savoir emprunté (Q5 à Q17)

##### *Les objectifs perçus*

Si les expériences des répondants sont variées et, par certains aspects, singulières, certains traits leur sont communs : l'acquisition progressive de compétences langagières doit être adaptée aux débouchés professionnels de chaque filière (R2, R3, R5, R9) ; elle doit aussi favoriser l'ouverture interculturelle (R4, R6, R7, R9, R12), et encourager l'apprentissage tout au long de la vie (R6, R7).

##### *L'accès au savoir spécialisé*

Beaucoup d'enseignants adoptent une démarche progressive, spiralaire, un peu en miroir de leurs pratiques de classe qui se fait de manière souvent concomitante. Pour la plupart, tout document est susceptible de servir de support de cours (vidéos, textes), de l'article de presse au document professionnel et la structuration des cours suit cet ordre de traitement (du plus général vers le plus spécialisé). Si tous définissent un document authentique comme s'adressant à des nativophones et n'ayant pas été didactisé, en revanche ils n'opèrent aucune hiérarchie dans la nature des documents y compris dans un enseignement de LSP. En revanche, les répondants reconnaissent qu'ils s'appuient volontiers sur leur formation initiale ou professionnelle, majoritairement la culture des aires linguistiques qu'ils ont étudiées, le critère étant la pertinence pour le cours et sa finalité. Cet effort entrepris pour acquérir un savoir spécialisé ne modifie pas l'orientation générale du cours de LSP, dédié principalement à des activités langagières

s'appuyant sur une thématique spécialisée dont ils indiquent qu'il est important de s'informer de son actualité. Sur le volet de la formation, certains regrettent qu'il n'existe aucune préparation spécifique à ce type d'enseignement (R6, R11), ce qui se traduit par une collaboration entre collègues de la même discipline (R3, R5, R7, R12), avec l'aide des plus expérimentés. En revanche, les contacts entre enseignants des langues et spécialistes du domaine d'adossement du cours sont rares (R3, R4, R5, R6, R8, R10) et pas toujours recherchés. Par ailleurs, peu (R1, R9) considèrent que savoir comment se déroulent les cours dans la discipline dominante servirait à leur pratique (R4, R8, R11).

### *La posture*

Les divergences d'opinion sont plus marquées dès lors qu'on demande aux répondants de caractériser leur relation au savoir emprunté et aux étudiants (Q16). Un groupe constitué d'enseignants natifs (FLE ou LVE) estime que l'enseignant est avant tout un médiateur entre langue et culture (R1, R2, R6, R10, R12), d'autres se considèrent davantage comme des enseignants ayant besoin de ressources spécialisées (R3, R4, R8, R10), et, en partie, comme des apprenants (R5), même si l'on constate que cette posture d'apprenant est plus directement marquée lorsque la question de la collaboration est posée (R9, R10). Pour la plupart, il s'agit d'une sorte de formation de terrain, basée sur l'expérience, le guidage et l'échange de pratiques s'effectuant entre pairs de la même discipline (R3, R7). Dans ce contexte, les contraintes sont diverses, mais celles qui sont mentionnées sont essentiellement matérielles; certains regrettent le manque de formation au sein de l'établissement ou de la composante, mais beaucoup estiment pouvoir évoluer en autonomie.

#### *4.4.4 La place de la transdisciplinarité (Q17 à Q20)*

Les répondants ont fait émerger trois remarques sur la place et la pertinence de la transdisciplinarité.

D'une part, elle est associée, selon eux, au caractère englobant de la langue : on a besoin de compétences langagières spécialisées et générales, quel que soit l'environnement professionnel, afin de former les étudiants à faire face à la complexité qu'implique la mobilité, par exemple. Pour certains, elle se justifie comme démarche visant à ouvrir l'horizon des étudiants (R2, R3, R6, R10, R12) dans un cadre professionnel (R5, R10). Ensuite, elle assure une légitimité professionnelle à l'enseignant de LSP tout autant qu'un espace de liberté pédagogique possible (R4, R6, R7) car enseigner signifie pour certains « créer des liens » (R1, R10). En revanche, il ne s'agit pas pour les répondants de suivre une démarche liée à la recherche mais plutôt de recul épistémique (R5, R6, R7, R10, R11) : la transdisciplinarité est un atout et un outil intimement lié à la pratique ; de démarche liée à l'émergence de savoir savant, elle est revendiquée comme une pratique experte.

### **5 Discussion : former des « spécialistes généralistes »**

Si les répondants, dans leur ensemble, assument leur rôle institutionnel d'enseignant de langue, ils ont parfois du mal à se situer vis-à-vis de leurs pairs spécialistes d'un domaine d'adossement de la LSP, que l'on peut relier au sentiment de légitimité institutionnelle. Ainsi, une répondante évoque le « syndrome de l'imposteur » (R10), qui questionne sa légitimité intellectuelle à parler d'une discipline dans laquelle elle n'a pas été formée initialement. C'est le même sentiment qui



anime R4, mais dans un mouvement inverse : la spécialité que représente l'enseignement des LSP serait menacée de nivellement, tant la demande de langue générale se fait présente par le biais des certifications. Pour R6, le contrôle excessif de l'enseignement, lorsqu'existent un programme et un livret pédagogique communs, est une contrainte et un frein à la démarche transdisciplinaire. Une telle approche reposerait donc sur le socle de la liberté pédagogique ; paradoxalement, une telle liberté doit s'accompagner d'une formation adéquate, qui donnerait la légitimité que constitue, aux yeux de certains répondants, l'expérience professionnelle (R8). Comment, dès lors, donner droit à une pratique d'enseignement transdisciplinaire se fondant sur l'association de savoirs hétérogènes, *empruntés* ? Tout d'abord, en reconsidérant la manière dont l'enseignement et la recherche pensent leurs objectifs et leurs interactions, parce qu'ils reposent sur des représentations biaisées. Tout se passe comme si la recherche précédait, causalement et chronologiquement, l'enseignement. Ce dernier se fonde sur un socle de savoirs établis par le travail de recherche, mais il n'est pas rare que des enseignants-chercheurs soient amenés à enseigner un domaine de leur discipline dont ils ne sont pas spécialistes, en particulier en première ou deuxième année. Il s'agit alors de fournir le savoir essentiel, fondamental, à partir duquel une spécialisation interviendra pour les étudiants : le chercheur spécialiste se fait enseignant généraliste dans sa discipline. Et pourtant, c'est en tant que spécialistes d'un domaine de recherche qu'ils tireront leur légitimité universitaire. *Mutatis mutandis*, les enseignants de LSP suivent une démarche parallèle dans leurs pratiques de classe, ce qui fait d'eux des enseignants spécialisés *et* généralistes. On voit bien que l'enseignement de la LSP est considéré comme spécifique, détaché de celui destiné à la filière LLCER qui forme l'essentiel des futurs enseignants de langue dans le secondaire en France. Pourtant, de par son caractère emprunté et relativement récent, il peine à garantir cette légitimité qui s'appuie sur une approche pédagogique touche-à-tout et ancillaire, dépendant des objectifs et des contenus d'une filière autre. En outre, le lien entre la transdisciplinarité revendiquée par certains chercheurs (Nicolescu 1999) et la pratique transdisciplinaire en LSP ne fait pas toujours sens et, en tout cas, est décrite comme éloignée des enjeux concrets de la pratique de classe. En revanche, si les besoins de formation à la didactique des LSP et à la pratique pédagogique sont mentionnés, la collaboration entre enseignants de langue et spécialistes du domaine d'adossement est peu évoquée : elle est souvent ressentie comme dépendant de contraintes fortes, matérielles et organisationnelles. Si elle engage un long travail de préparation, elle n'en serait pas moins fructueuse : beaucoup de malentendus sont nés *d'a priori* sur l'enseignement universitaire en France (Chaplier 2013). Les filières sont fondées sur les disciplines et demeurent encore très cloisonnées ; elles ignorent souvent la manière dont se fait la recherche et l'enseignement dans la pratique d'autres disciplines. Outre ces facteurs de brouillage, la question de la transdisciplinarité dans l'enseignement des LSP ne peut devenir centrale qu'à la condition de refuser l'association entre spécialité et exhaustivité, tout autant que des définitions trop abstraites du savoir. Pourtant, il est clair que la spécialisation croissante de la recherche prend paradoxalement acte de ce divorce ; chercheurs et enseignants de LSP s'accordent à dire qu'il est impossible d'être spécialiste de tout, mais l'activité d'enseigner souffre aussi de représentations liées à cette tentation de l'exhaustivité.

## 6 Conclusion

Le caractère hybride, contextualisé et ancillaire de la LSP en tant que domaine de recherche et d'enseignement est en fait un atout pour les études supérieures. Il permet d'intégrer

l'enseignement d'une langue et d'une culture, trait que certains répondants pensent prioritaire, à la recherche. L'apport culturel du cours de LSP, voire la notion de médiation interculturelle, peut constituer un axe de réflexion didactique en lien avec la LSP et les questions de mobilité et de professionnalisation des parcours. Enfin, si tout apprentissage ne peut se réduire à la présence en cours, il faut aussi reconsidérer le rôle de l'enseignant de LSP comme un Autre Plus Compétent qui enseigne un savoir, mais aussi un 'savoir-apprendre' censé encourager la poursuite autonome de l'apprentissage chez les étudiants. La transdisciplinarité intègre et dépasse les barrières disciplinaires mais également celles qui séparent enseignement et recherche, démarche didactique et démarche de recherche. La dimension entre savoir hérité de la recherche, savoir issu de la pratique enseignante et savoir disciplinaire n'entretiennent aucune relation hiérarchique mais au contraire s'agencent dans la mesure où enseigner une langue de spécialité c'est élaborer des solutions à des problèmes d'origines et s'exerçant à des niveaux multiples. C'est une réponse concrète à des problèmes qui ne sont pas formulés en tant que tels notamment sur la professionnalisation et l'adéquation des enseignements aux objectifs professionnels. Plus qu'un concept, la transdisciplinarité s'apparente à une boîte à outils.

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## Annex 1: Questionnaire

### Projet SAVEMP

#### **La co-construction du savoir « emprunté » (SAVEMP) des enseignants de langues du secteur LANSAD : enjeux épistémologiques, analyse de formations, pratiques de recherche et d'enseignement dans le domaine de la didactique des langues du secteur Lansad.**

Le projet interuniversitaire SAVEMP a pour objectif de définir la notion de « langue de spécialité » (LSP) dans une perspective didactique. Partant du constat qu'il s'agit d'un objet hybride, constitué du binôme langue-spécialisé, dont l'enseignement revient à l'enseignant de langue dans le secteur dit LANSAD (Langues pour Spécialistes d'Autres Disciplines), on s'interrogera sur le seuil de compétences dans le domaine de spécialité à acquérir par l'enseignant de langue dans le domaine d'adossement de son cours. Pour cela, nous développerons le concept de « savoir emprunté » (Chevallard 2006) conçu comme l'ensemble des influences, des transferts en termes de supports et de transposition didactique entre les deux disciplines dont il faut identifier les points d'entrée. Cette question sur le rapport des enseignants de LSP au savoir « emprunté » permettra d'établir aussi le degré de légitimité attribué à ce type d'enseignement des langues.

#### **Questionnaire qualitatif (réponse souhaitée au plus tard le 10 juillet 2021)**

*Il est possible de répondre à ces questions en anglais ou espagnol*

**Q1 :** Qu'est-ce qui a motivé votre choix de LVE comme objet d'étude/cursus universitaire ?

**Q2 :** Qu'est-ce qui vous a amené à l'enseignement de cette langue ? Quelque chose a-t-il changé depuis dans cette motivation ?

**Q3 (a) :** Avez-vous déjà abordé un domaine autre que l'étude de la LVE au cours de vos études ? Est-ce que cela s'est avéré utile pour vous ?

**Q3 (b) :** Avez-vous travaillé dans une entreprise (autre que l'éducation nationale ou supérieur) ? Si oui, dans quel domaine ? Et quelle profession ?

**Q4 :** Comment conceviez-vous l'enseignement des LVE dans l'enseignement supérieur lors de votre recrutement ? Et maintenant ? Avez-vous fait l'expérience d'un changement de valeurs de la profession ?

**Q5 :** A quoi « sert » votre enseignement de LSP ?

**Q6 :** Sur quoi vous êtes-vous appuyés pour aborder la LSP ?

**Q7(a) :** Par quoi (quels documents, sources) avez-vous commencé ?

**Q7(b) :** Avez-vous pris contact : avec des collègues de langue expérimentés, des enseignants spécialistes du domaine d'adossement ?

**Q8 :** Qu'entend-on, selon vous, par « document authentique » en LSP ?

**Q9 :** Avez-vous pu/souhaité mobiliser vos connaissances issues de votre formation initiale (ex : la civilisation, la littérature, etc.) ?

**Q10 :** De quelle manière enrichissez-vous le contenu de votre cours de LSP, et pourquoi ?

**Q11** : Comment agencez-vous les différents supports de cours ? Les outils pédagogiques ? En fonction de quel objectif ?

**Q12** : Quelles contraintes institutionnelles avez-vous dû gérer et intégrer à votre cours ? Cela a-t-il, selon vous, changé la manière dont vous conceviez vos cours de LSP ?

**Q13** : Comment avez-vous intégré votre expérience professionnelle d'enseignement et apprentissage des langues à votre *contenu* de cours de LSP ? Quels choix et quelles priorités ?

**Q14** : Jugez-vous utile de connaître les enjeux didactiques de la spécialité ? De voir comment se déroulent les cours par exemple ? Peut-on/doit-on s'inspirer de la manière dont la spécialité s'enseigne pour élaborer un cours de LSP ?

**Q15** : Est-ce que vous établissez un pont entre LSP et contenu spécialisé ? Si oui, comment ? Sur quoi vous fondez vous ?

**Q16** : Vous considérez-vous plutôt comme

- un « apprenant » dans le domaine spécialisé ?
- un enseignant qui a besoin de ressources spécialisées pour faire son cours ?
- un médiateur entre la langue et le spécialisé ?

Expliquez votre préférence.

**Q17** : Quelle place accorderiez-vous au travail collaboratif (entre langue et spécialité par exemple) ? A la réflexion personnelle (retour sur pratiques) ?

**Q18** : Que vous inspire la définition suivante de la transdisciplinarité ?

« La transdisciplinarité désigne un savoir qui parcourt diverses sciences sans se soucier des frontières. »<sup>12</sup> Est-ce pertinent dans le cadre de vos activités d'enseignement ?

**Q19** : Comment concevez-vous votre mission d'enseignant en contexte LANSAD face aux mutations à l'œuvre dans le monde de l'éducation, le monde du travail, celui de la recherche ?

**Q20** : Adopter une posture transdisciplinaire dans votre environnement professionnel vous paraît-il souhaitable, possible, réalisable ?

### Informations sur le répondant

Je suis un homme – une femme

Discipline (ou section CNU) :

Nombre d'années d'expérience dans l'enseignement ?

Quel est votre statut ? (rayer les mention inutiles)

Enseignant-chercheur – PRAG/PRCE – ATER – Lecteur ou maître de langue – Contractuel – Vacataire – Autre (précisez) :

Nom de votre établissement ?

De votre structure de rattachement (composante) ?

Quelle est votre langue native ?

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<sup>12</sup> L'anthropologie préhistorique de André Leroi-Gourhan et la sociologie historique de Norbert Elias en sont de bons exemples où la notion de système est présente en physique, en biologie, en économie, en sociologie.

# “Instead of Hype, Would You Like to Hear Real Examples?”: Exploring Blockchain Talk on Twitter

*Hanna Limatius, Tanja Sihvonen & Alesha Serada*

**Abstract** This article investigates Twitter as an arena of organizations’ impression management. We look into the ways organizations use this social media platform for establishing an image of competence and expertise around a new technological innovation. This study is based on a discourse analysis of 3,033 Finnish language tweets, sent between 2015–2018. These tweets were selected on the basis of containing the hashtag #blockchain, which allowed us to explore how organizations and their representatives engaged in “blockchain talk” in the Finnish Twittersphere. Our findings indicate that while this blockchain talk most commonly manifested through news and information dissemination, it was also used to construct expertise and to highlight organizational values. Even organizations that had nothing to do with actual blockchain applications seemed to want to participate in the blockchain talk. In addition to presenting new insights into the online discourse on technological innovation, this study contributes to research on Twitter as a forum for organizational communication.

**Keywords** blockchain, expertise, impression management, organizational communication, technological innovation, Twitter

## 1 Introduction

Social media has become an important arena for organizations’ impression management (Benthaus/Risius/Beck 2016, Sun/Fang/Zhang 2021). By participating in discussions on trending topics, organizations can construct their image in relation to or through these topics. For example, organizations can use discussions to highlight their values or forms of expertise, even if they are only indirectly associated with the topic. In this article, we examine how different organizational representatives participate in such impression management by contributing to a discussion on a new technological innovation – namely, blockchain technology. Blockchain and its various real and potential applications constitute a popular topic in contemporary media, particularly in the context of cryptocurrencies and NFTs<sup>1</sup> (Serada 2023) and new business opportunities (Rosati/Čuk 2019). Many organizations are eager to find opportunities to adapt blockchain technology to their businesses and areas of operation, and many are also eager to *appear* adapting it – a fact that is reflected in the ways these organizations communicate on social media (e. g. Beck et al. 2019). As Egliston/Carter (2023) argue, in the context of blockchain, discourses are particularly important, as the technology still exists predominantly within a discursive register and its value is largely speculative in nature (also e. g. Serada 2023). In many of these discourses, blockchain technology is perceived as “revolutionary” (Meunier 2018) and the “technology of the future” (Demirkan/Demirkan/McKee 2020), which makes

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it attractive to organizations that wish to appear up-to-date and visionary with technological innovation. However, as the discourses on blockchain, especially in the context of cryptocurrencies, are also characterized by instability, unpredictability (e. g. Lynn/Rosati/Fox 2018), and environmental concerns (e. g. Polemis/Tsionas 2021), contributing to blockchain discourse as part of organizational impression management is not short of risk or potential problems.

In this study, we view organizational tweets referring to blockchain technology as acts of impression management (Goffman 1959). Impression management can be considered as “efforts made by individuals to control information in order to influence the impressions formed about them in the minds of others” (Richey/Ravishankar/Coupland 2016: 598). Goffman’s original formulation stressed “face-work” in controlling information in social interaction, but in this article impression management refers to the communicative processes by which desired identities are secured from an organizational perspective. Organizational impression management consists of a multitude of practices (Gaim/Clegg/Pina e Cunha 2021), but here, we focus on the empirical analysis of tweets posted by organizational representatives. Following Goffman (1959), these organizational representatives are considered members in a “team of performers”, whose social media posts contribute to impressions of the broader organization they represent (Richey/Ravishankar/Coupland 2016: 598).

In this article, our goal is to explore the ways different organizations and their representatives engage in what we call *blockchain talk* on Twitter in order to identify the main actors of the early “blockchain community” in Finland, and to establish how these actors discursively position themselves and construct particular impressions in relation to blockchain technology and its applications. By *community*, we refer to the audience discussing a certain topic on Twitter, brought together ad hoc by a hashtag (Bruns/Burgess 2011). Organizational communication refers to the ways in which the members of an organization use messages and social interaction to create, sustain, and manage meanings at all levels within and across organizational functions and structures (e. g. Mazzei 2014). This includes establishing and maintaining a favorable image among organizations’ stakeholders (Christensen/Cornelissen 2013: 387). While there is previous research on the role of social media for organizations’ impression management (e. g. Benthaus/Risius/Beck 2016, Fieseler/Ranzini 2015, Richey/Ravishankar/Coupland 2016, Sun/Fang/Zhang 2021), less attention has been paid to the ways in which organizational representatives, or performers, use social media indirectly for establishing an image of competence and expertise specifically in the context of technological innovation.

Through our analysis of organizational tweeting on blockchain technology, we aim to shed light on how an image of competence and expertise is constructed in the Finnish Twitter-sphere by asking the following research questions: 1) Which types of organizations take part in blockchain talk? 2) What types of tweets does the blockchain talk consist of? And finally, 3) how do the tweets function as part of organizational impression management?

To answer these questions, we conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of 3,033 tweets, sent between 2015–2018 by Twitter users who represent different organizations and tweet about blockchain in the Finnish context (identified through the use of the Finnish language). Discourse analysis was used to distinguish between different types of tweets and to establish the range of topics discussed – that is, we focused on the ways the organizations used written language to construct particular ideas of blockchain and to position themselves in relation to these ideas (e. g. Herring 2004). Our data represents a variety of collective actors, ranging from commercial enterprises and public sector agencies to non-governmental and non-profit organizations (NGOs). The selected observation period can be considered the “first



stage” of blockchain talk in the Finnish Twittersphere; our earlier study showed that the first usage of the Finnish term for blockchain (“lohkoketju”) on Twitter took place on July 6, 2015 (Sihvonen/Koskela/Huusko 2020: 21 f.).

Although organizations’ tweets have been studied before (e. g. Etter 2014, Lovejoy/Saxton 2012, Park/Reber/Chon 2016, Su et al. 2017), previous studies have largely focused on examining tweets within specific industries (e. g. science organizations, health organizations, non-profits). Our focus, in contrast, is determined by a shared topic (i. e. blockchain as a technological innovation) that is discussed on Twitter by an exceptionally wide range of actors and industries. The relevance of Twitter as a platform for organizational communication on blockchain technology has previously been addressed by Lynn/Rosati/Fox (2018), who have presented work on organizations using Twitter as a tool to legitimize blockchain. However, their focus is on applying a legitimacy taxonomy to the study of tweets, whereas we focus on how organizational impression management works on Twitter. We begin by explaining the relevance of blockchain as a “trending” topic, particularly in the context of Twitter, and then move on to analyzing the different types of tweets that address this topic from the perspective of organizational impression management.

## 2 Theoretical background

### *2.1 Blockchain technology and its applications in social media discussions*

Blockchain technology rose to the public eye along with the introduction of the first cryptocurrency, bitcoin, in the White Paper published by the pseudonym Satoshi Nakamoto (2008). The idea of a decentralized, anonymous digital currency originated from the cryptoanarchist and cypherpunk movement that sought new technological means for “horizontal” governance and economy (Hütten 2019). Despite the anti-corporate and anti-central banking agenda of the developers and early adopters of blockchain, its financial, commercial, and technological potential initiated its institutional and organizational adoption in the early 2010s (Iansiti/Lakhani 2017, Rosati/Čuk 2019). At the most basic level, a blockchain can be described as a digital ledger: it is a distributed database that consists of chronologically arranged records compiled in blocks, linked and secured by cryptographic hashes. There is no central server; ideally, the archive of all transactions is reproduced in every node of the main network and constantly updated upon consensus between the nodes entitled to validation rights (Tredinnick 2019). Blockchain’s most common use case is professional cryptocurrency trading, although many other uses, including industrial applications such as supply chains (e. g. Helo/Hao, 2019) and smart grids for the electricity market (Diestelmeier 2019), have been suggested.

Cryptocurrencies and blockchain technologies have been actively discussed on social media since their introduction, which has contributed to public awareness about them and shaped their adopter communities. Early on in blockchain studies, Garcia et al. (2014) described feedback loops between public communication on bitcoin, the number of new bitcoin wallets, and increase in its price. Since then, numerous studies have pursued similar goals of discovering interdependencies between social and legacy media appearances of cryptocurrencies and their prices (e. g., Laskowski/Kim 2016, Steinert/Herff 2018, Valencia/Gómez-Espinosa/Valdés-Aguirre 2019). As we have demonstrated elsewhere (Serada 2023), previous empirical studies on Twitter and blockchain have focused on the price changes of cryptocurrencies and the financial gains for individual traders that potentially follow them, not on organizational

communication or the blockchain discourse itself. Nevertheless, Twitter is clearly relevant for blockchain adopters (Ante 2023), and its significance in organizational communication is increasing (e. g. Wang/Yang 2020). We need new research to understand its potential for introducing “hot”, trending technological topics through which organizational actors are able to brand themselves as trailblazers.

## 2.2 Organizational communication on Twitter

Twitter facilitates various types of communication, from reporting daily activities to forwarding information and sharing links to outside resources (Page 2011: 93). While it is categorized as a social networking site, Twitter’s interactional dynamics differ from platforms designed for peer-to-peer communication, such as Facebook (Page 2011: 94). Twitter does not “impose mutual connections on users” (Okay/Ašanin Gole/Okay 2021: 177), which leads to asymmetric networks. Indeed, although Twitter also enables personal communication (e. g. direct messages), it is commonly used for one-to-many communication by organizations and public figures (e. g. Etter 2014, Okay/Ašanin Gole/Okay 2021). In Finland, Twitter is popular with politicians, (political) journalists, and researchers who are even regarded as an elite network (Ruoho/Kuusipalo 2019). Twitter also allows organizations to promote themselves and to disseminate information about their activities,<sup>2</sup> while also maintaining dialogue with stakeholders (e. g. Wang/Yang 2020). However, organizations’ Twitter use often emphasizes informing over interaction (Lim/Lee-Won 2017: 422 f.).

Previous research has explored organizational communication on Twitter in different contexts. Lovejoy/Saxton (2012), who studied Twitter use by non-profit organizations, established a three-part categorization for the functions of tweets in delivering a message: *information*, *community*, and *action*. Similarly, Su et al. (2017) studied how scientific institutions used Twitter, focusing on the content of tweets, hyperlinks, hashtags, mentions, and retweets. They also established three main functions for tweets: *information*, *participation*, and *community* (Su et al. 2017: 580). Of these, information was the most popular category with 74 % of the tweets (Su et al. 2017: 583). They also found out that while the use of hyperlinks was common among science organizations’ tweets, other interactive features such as mentioning and retweeting were less prevalent (Su et al. 2017: 584). In their study on the Twitter communication of US-based health organizations, Park/Reber/Chon (2016) also focused on the topics, functions, and interactive features of tweets. They found that health organizations’ tweets focused more on organization-related topics as opposed to personal health topics, that original tweets were more prevalent than retweets, and that the use of hyperlinks was common (Park/Reber/Chon 2016: 194). They identified benefits of Twitter use for organizations, including community-building, displaying credibility, and “pushing out” original content (Park/Reber/Chon 2016: 197). In their experimental study on retweeting in organizational Twitter communication, Lim/Lee-Won (2017) found that dialogic retweets (i. e. an organization’s retweets of other tweets that mention the organization) had a more positive effect on organizations’ social presence than monologic tweets (i. e. one-way tweets that do not feature interaction) on the same topics. Their results highlight the importance of interactive Twitter communication,

<sup>2</sup> However, it is worth noting that Twitter, along with other social media platforms, also has its problematic sides for organizations. For a critical discussion on digitalization and its effects on organizations, cf. e. g. Trittin-Ulbrich/Scherer 2021.

suggesting that organizations should use Twitter's technological affordances more in order to keep their audiences engaged (Lim/Lee-Won 2017: 431).

Based on previous research, we argue that Twitter use has its benefits in terms of impression management, as tweets can be used strategically to project favorable impressions of organizations (Richey/Ravishankar/Coupland 2016: 598). However, organizations do not necessarily utilize Twitter's features to their full potential, as they focus on one-way communication more than interacting with stakeholders. The present study adds to the literature on organizations' Twitter use by examining the types of tweets organizations make use of when participating in discourse around a technological innovation that is not necessarily directly related to their business.

### 3 Material and methods

The data for this study was collected using the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) between November 18 and December 24, 2018. The search query was based on the Finnish word for blockchain, *lohkoketju*, as a hashtag, and it yielded results from between September 2015 and November 2018. This raw data contained 5,186 tweets. Originally, the search term was selected as the research group was interested in finding out when the first instances of blockchain terminology began to appear on social media in Finland. By analyzing the appearance of such terms from 2015 onwards, it is possible to detect the "pioneering" organizations taking part in impression management through the discourse concerning this new technology. Furthermore, the presence of a hashtag links this study to an established line of Twitter research, where hashtags are considered as an essential element organizing and structuring online conversations (Bruns/Stieglitz 2014).

The language recognition of the Twitter API was tested to indicate Finnish language tweets, but the results also included a few tweets in English and some hybrid constellations. Retweets, quotes, and replies were included in the data. Using the Finnish search term allowed us to reach a manually codable sample that covered the time period under investigation. Limiting the data collection to the Finnish context enabled us to identify and analyze all the organizational actors participating in the discussion and made it easier to decipher their origins.<sup>3</sup>

To begin our analysis, we read each tweet to form an overall idea of the people and organizations tweeting about blockchain. As our interest was particularly on organizational communication and impression management, the next step was to narrow the data down to tweets from organizations' official accounts as well as by individuals who identified as representatives of organizations. This was done by examining the users' public Twitter profiles.

Individual users were viewed as "organizational representatives" if their profile text was directly linked to an organization, e. g., "CEO of [organization]", or "works in marketing at [organization]". Even though such accounts do not represent the entire organization, they are relevant in terms of impression management, because followers are likely to associate these accounts with the organization (Richey/Ravishankar/Coupland 2016: 607). Accounts were, however, omitted from the data if the user had explicitly stated that the account should be viewed as unrelated to their organization, through statements such as "my tweets do not rep-

<sup>3</sup> Because of the algorithmic factors of Twitter as a platform, the data is not comprehensive, i. e., we do not claim that it includes all the tweets about blockchain in Finnish in this timeframe. However, we consider it a sufficient sample of how the Finnish Twittersphere discussed blockchain.

resent [organization]”. Users who had deleted their account or made it private after the original data collection were not included, nor were accounts that had been banned by Twitter. Thus, all individuals whose tweets were included were verified to be affiliated with an organization, and had a public, active Twitter account at the time of the analysis.

After identifying tweets by organizations and their representatives, we were left with a sample of 3,033 tweets. The tweets were then compiled into an Excel file, and manually coded according to a) the industry in which the organization operated (e. g. IT, finance, education), and b) the textual content of the tweet. In order to establish which industries were represented in the data, we again examined the users’ profiles. If we were unfamiliar with the organization, and the industry was not evident from their profile information, we looked at the official websites of organizations, typically linked in the profiles. Our categories for different types of tweets were based on a grounded, inductive discourse analysis and informed by earlier research on organizational Twitter communication (Lovejoy/Saxton 2012, Park et al. 2016, Su et al. 2017). We followed Herring’s (2004: 339) model for Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) that builds upon “logs of verbal interaction (characters, words, utterances, messages, exchanges, threads, archives, etc.)” in empirical, computer-mediated data. Herring (2004: 341) names identifying patterns in texts the “basic goal” of discourse analysis. Thus, we conducted a close reading of the tweets and looked for patterns in the ways the organizations communicated about blockchain related topics. Our interpretation of the tweets was guided by the four levels of discursive features established by Herring (2004, 2018): 1) structure, 2) meaning, 3) interaction management, and 4) social phenomena.

On the level of *structure*, we looked for linguistic features such as “us vs. them” language (Herring 2004: 361) in order to distinguish between different types of tweets – for example, to detect whether the blockchain tweets were related to the organization’s own activities. We also considered specific ways of using structural features typical of Twitter, such as the use of hashtags to construct meanings, and the placement of links within tweets. On the level of *meaning*, speech acts like congratulating and requesting advice, were observed. *Interaction management* was present in the use of retweets and mentions (Su et al. 2017, Lim/Lee-Won 2017), as well as questions and responses. Finally, on the level of *social phenomena*, we observed how Twitter users displayed their awareness of hierarchies, power dynamics, and other social factors. These were evident in practices of sharing one’s employer’s content, in acknowledgements of others’ expertise, and in language use that highlighted organizational values.

Through the analysis of discursive features of tweets, we identified five main types of blockchain tweets:

1. *Engagement*. These tweets feature direct discussions with other Twitter users, e. g. supporting another user’s argument or requesting advice.
2. *Information*. These tweets focus on general information/opinions on blockchain and are typically unrelated to specific organizational activities.
3. *Promotion of others*. These tweets promote other users’ activities or products by e. g. congratulating or endorsing them. Unlike engaging tweets, they do not necessarily aim for direct communication with the other party.
4. *Self-promotion*. These tweets advertise the user’s own activities, services and/or products.
5. *Resource*. These tweets focus on sharing materials such as reports or documents, blog posts, and podcasts. They are more closely tied to the organization’s activities than general information tweets, but are not clearly promotional.

Despite slight overlap, we consider these tweet types as distinct ways of engaging in impression management. Through a detailed qualitative analysis, we were able to identify the particularities that distinguish each category.

Finally, we also illustrate how blockchain talk was distributed across industries, and which types of blockchain tweets were most frequent during our observation period. For this quantitative section, we calculated how many blockchain tweets were posted within each industry, and how many of them were included in each of the tweet types listed above. We also combined these two perspectives by calculating the frequencies of each tweet type within each industry.

In the following discussion of the results, examples from Finnish tweets have been translated into English by the first author. The tweets analyzed are publicly available, and the organizations and their representatives are assumed to be aware of the public nature of their statements. Ethical aspects have been taken into consideration in accordance with the guidelines discussed in Franzke et al. (2020). In the examples, the usernames of official accounts of organizations have been retained, but the names of individuals have been hidden, and pseudonyms (“user\_1”, “user\_2”, etc.) used instead.

## 4 Results

We start by providing an overview of the types of organizations and organizational representatives in the data, and the frequencies of their blockchain tweets, before moving on to the results of the discourse analysis, which show how organizations engaged in blockchain talk and thereby contributed to impression management. Finally, we comment on the relationship between different industries and types of tweets.

### *4.1 Actors: Organizations and organizational representatives*

The organizations and organizational representatives were divided into fifteen categories, which are presented, along with the frequencies of tweet types in each category, in Figure 1 below.

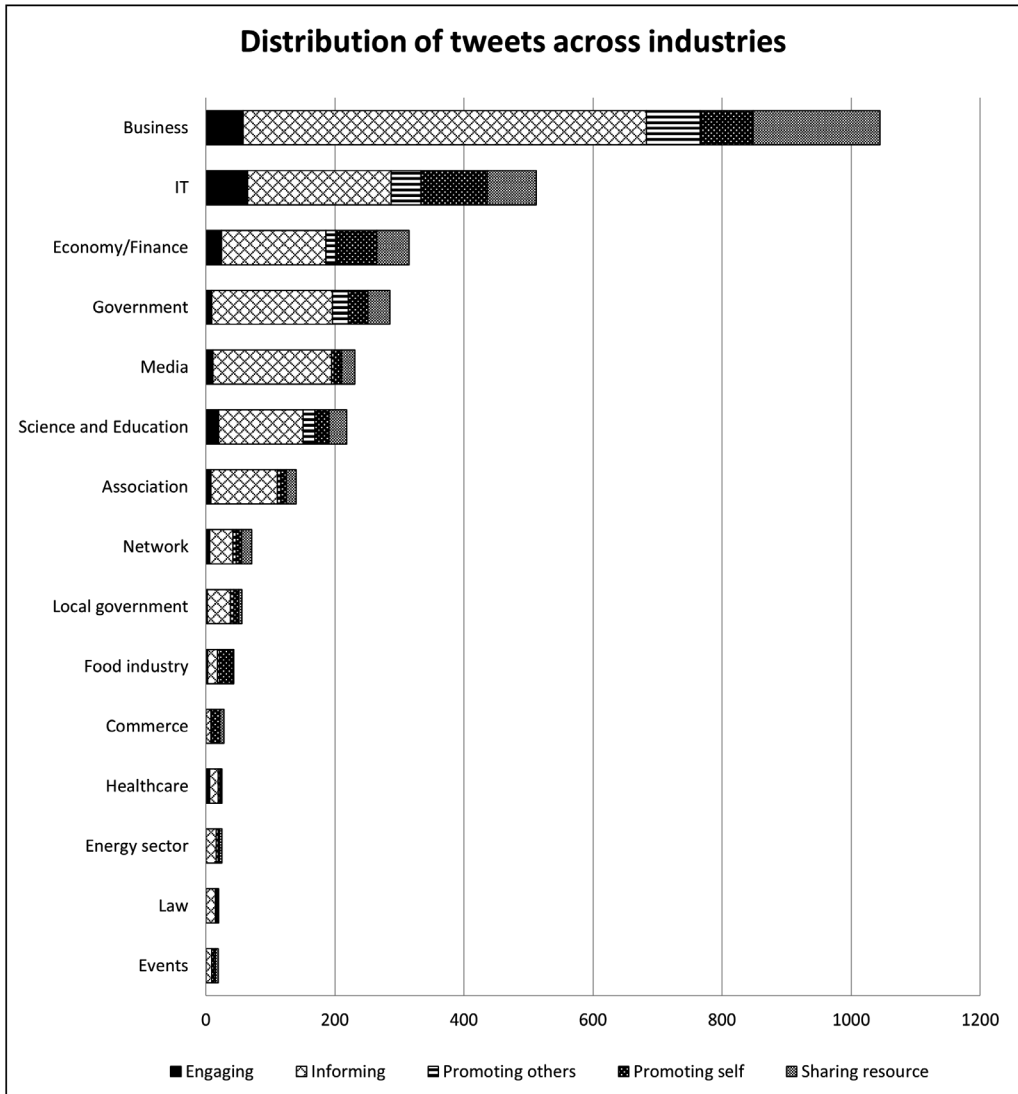


Figure 1: Distribution of tweets across industries. The figure is based on the raw frequencies of tweets.

Organizations in the business category tweeted about blockchain technology the most (1,045 tweets), followed by IT organizations (512 tweets) and the financial sector (315 tweets). This is perhaps unsurprising, considering that business was also the largest and broadest category in the data, and the other two have obvious interests when it comes to blockchain, particularly in the context of cryptocurrencies and the transformation of fintech they are expected to bring along. The business category contained a variety of large and small enterprises, recruitment agencies, and freelancers that could not be categorized in other industries. Notably, it featured many consulting firms, which, according to Lynn/Rosati/Fox (2018) have “a key role in blockchain development and disseminating information to the general public”.

However, governmental accounts (286 tweets), the media (231 tweets), and science and education (218 tweets) were not far behind IT and the financial sector in terms of frequency of blockchain tweets. Scientific and educational institutions tweeted about blockchain roughly as often as representatives of the media. Presumably, blockchain technology is of interest to actors in both industries because of its connotations to innovation. Both the “revolutionary” aspects of blockchain and the criticism directed at it, in the context of cryptocurrencies in particular, make it newsworthy and “click-bait” for the media. Since blockchain applications outside the cryptocurrency context are still relatively rare and new, it also makes sense that finding possible new applications and reporting on them would be of interest to researchers and educators. It is noteworthy that governmental actors tweeted about blockchain technology slightly more often than either the media or scientific institutions. Finnish governing officials seem to be interested in blockchain and its applications, and they communicate these interests to the public via social media. Two opposing rationalities might explain this: first, governments are eager to support new technologies if they have potential to boost competitiveness and economic growth, and second, officials are required to protect citizens from the potential hazards associated with new technologies (Mukhtar-Landgren/Paulsson 2021: 136).

4.2 Content: Types of tweets

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, informing tweets (58 %) were the most common type in the data, which is in line with previous studies on organizations’ tweets (Lovejoy/Saxton 2012, Park/Reber/Chon 2016, Su et al. 2017). While informing tweets were prevalent in most industries, there were some exceptions, which we will discuss in section 4.3. Next, we provide examples from the data to illustrate the types of tweets that organizational representatives used to participate in blockchain talk.

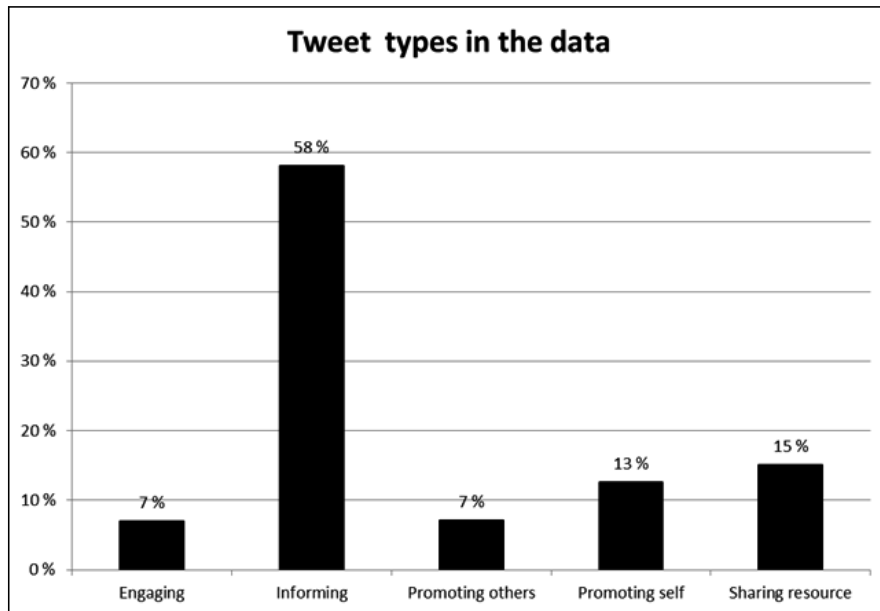


Figure 2: Tweet types in the data. This figure illustrates the percentages of each tweet type.

#### 4.2.1 Engagement

Through engaging tweets, organizations sought to connect with other users, typically those with knowledge on blockchain technology. Thus, they displayed an interest in actively contributing to blockchain discourse on Twitter by publicly discussing the topic with others. Engaging tweets included expressions of agreement or disagreement, as well as giving and requesting advice. Sometimes users directly mentioned one another, but in some cases specific users were not tagged; rather, “Twitter users in general” were addressed, or hashtags were used to direct the message to particular communities, e. g.:

**Tweet:** “@DigitalistInfo: RT @user\_1: I have trouble understanding #blockchain, or rather the groundbreaking benefits of its application. #Digitalist”

**Industry:** Business

**Date:** 21 November 2016

The above tweet is an example of what Lim/Lee-Won (2017) refer to as dialogic retweets. This tweet was most likely retweeted by DigitalistInfo, the official account of Digitalist Global, a company focusing on customer experience, design and technology, because of the hashtag #Digitalist. The original tweeter has added this hashtag with the goal of interacting with DigitalistInfo and its community of followers. Although Digitalistinfo does not reply to the user directly, by retweeting, the organization engages with their followers and potentially connects user\_1 with a person willing to inform them. The presence of the hashtag #blockchain connects the tweet to a broader discussion concerning blockchain, and to the community discussing it, but the role of the organization is that of a messenger – they do not directly contribute any information or opinions on blockchain. Rather, they participate in impression management by demonstrating that they want to help their followers in finding relevant information.

**Tweet:** “@user\_2 Dear #internet, tell me an easy way to buy #bitcoin – I have tried two ways and both are #NoGood – #Blockchain”

**Industry:** IT

**Date:** 1 September 2017

In the example above, however, we have a direct request for advice on bitcoin trading. Unlike in the tweet retweeted by Digitalist Global, here user\_2 does not link their question to any particular person or organization. Rather, they address the “entire internet”, although in reality the tweet is directed at a specific community: those with knowledge on cryptocurrency trading. By addressing a broad audience, user\_2 discursively positions themselves as a newcomer in terms of blockchain discourse. The user represents an IT organization, but they do not explicitly connect their own business to the tweet. Thus, they appear to participate in blockchain talk to seek advice from others, instead of highlighting their own expertise or the services of their company. Seeking advice or assistance on social media contributes to impression management, as it involves building relationships with others and displaying the user’s awareness of the limits of their knowledge (Fieseler/Ranzini 2015: 506). The public nature of the request is also relevant in terms of impression management. Since user\_2 participates in blockchain discourse with a Twitter account linked to an organization, their tweets may contribute to the associations and the image the organization evokes in public.



#### 4.2.2 Information

Informative tweets covered a variety of topics in the data, ranging from sharing general information on blockchain technology to presenting subjective opinions on it. Lovejoy/Saxton, who consider informing as the “basic function of Twitter” (2012: 341), define their “information” category as “tweets containing information about the organization’s activities, highlights from events, or any other news, facts, reports or information relevant to an organization’s stakeholders” (Lovejoy/Saxton 2012: 343). Park et al. (2016) also include “sharing members’ personal stories and experiences” under “informing”. Thus, information is conceptualized broadly in earlier literature. Notably, in our data, tweets featuring general information about blockchain were typically not explicitly connected to the organizations’ own activities:

**Tweet:** “@VTTFinland: Will #blockchain revolutionize commerce? Transparency and distribution of information result in a trustworthy approach [link]”

**Industry:** Science and Education

**Date:** 30 August 2017

Tweets like the above appeared frequently in the data. It was common for different organizational representatives to discursively highlight the innovative aspects of blockchain technology through the use of words such as “revolutionize”, “hype”, or “future”. This tweet contained a link to a national newspaper article, which was typical of such tweets. The practice of frequent linking is in line with previous research on organizational communication on Twitter (Su et al. 2017: 575). Here, the tweet containing the link comes from VTT (Technical Research Center of Finland), a state-owned research institution. As an institution operating under ownership of the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, VTT can be seen as having a responsibility to inform the public about news on technical innovation. While the tweet itself does not explicitly state the institution’s stance on blockchain technology, they nevertheless express their interest in the topic by sharing the article with their followers. Thus, they indirectly take part in blockchain talk and manage their impression.

Informative tweets where a user stated their own opinion on or experience with blockchain were common. As blockchain is a trending topic, especially in the context of cryptocurrencies, organizations may want to share their interest in it to appear as trailblazers, even if it does not directly concern their organizational activities:

**Tweet:** “@user\_3: I have been spending time outside my comfort zone, learning about #cryptocurrency and #blockchain. I started with #Ethereum. #ETH #blockchain”

**Industry:** Energy sector

**Date:** 25 August 2017

Again, the above tweet is not directly related to the user’s organization (an electricity company), but rather their role as an investor, which is also mentioned in their Twitter profile. The information in the tweet may not be of interest to those who follow this user based on organizational affiliation, but it does express an interest in cryptocurrency trading, which can be seen as an impression management tactic that convinces the user’s followers they are up-to-date with investor trends. Mentioning an interest in cryptocurrencies publicly on an account linked to an organization may indirectly affect stakeholders’ impressions of the organization,

and therefore contain an element of risk. If an organizational representative – one member of the team of performers who contribute to an organization's impression management – posts content that stakeholders do not consider suitable, the overall impression of the organization may be affected (Richey/Ravishankar/Coupland 2016).

#### 4.2.3 Promoting others

Promotion was common in our data, and we divided it into promoting others and self-promotion. A tweet could be seen to promote others if a user highlighted another party's activities, potentially driving traffic to their account. For example, congratulatory tweets such as the following were present:

**Tweet:** “@BusinessFinland: Congratulations to @user\_4 for obtaining the first #blockchain patent in Finland for reliable reporting and recording of geoinformation in e. g. logistics and the supply chain #RebootFinland [link]”

**Industry:** Business

**Date:** 16 February 2018

Even though this tweet mentions a specific user, it contributes to impression management differently than the engaging tweets discussed in 4.2.1. Here, Business Finland demonstrates their own belonging in the Finnish blockchain community by endorsing a key actor in the field. While the tweet addresses user\_4, its primary goal is to promote the first blockchain patent in Finland, instead of starting a discussion. Thus, endorsement can also be used for impression management:

**Tweet:** “@HelsinkiFintech: Instead of hype, would you like to hear real examples of using #blockchain in the financial sector? Come listen to @user\_5's talk at Messukeskus on 25 April [link] #blockchain #fintech #digitalfinanceFI”

**Industry:** Economy/Finance

**Date:** 11 April 2018

This tweet illustrates another promotion practice. HelsinkiFintech promotes an upcoming talk by another user. Based on the users' Twitter profiles, they are not directly affiliated – however, considering the presumed audience of HelsinkiFintech, the event is relevant to their stakeholders. They also use the tweet to discursively construct their own legitimacy as a blockchain expert; they are aware of the difference between mere “hype” and “real”, useful examples of blockchain application. Again, tagging is not used to engage user\_5 in discussion, but rather to advertise the event to an audience and to signal a willingness to be associated with user\_5. Even though they are endorsing another actor, HelsinkiFintech still uses blockchain talk to manage their own image.

#### 4.2.4 Self-promotion

In contrast to the promotion of others, self-promotion tweets advertised the user's own services or products. Thus, unlike many other forms of blockchain talk, these tweets were directly linked to the organizations' specific activities:

**Tweet:** “@user\_6: Serving you tech in a way that is understandable even if you are not an engineer. :) #quantumcomputing #blockchain #techtectech [link]”

**Industry:** IT

**Date:** 5 March 2018

The link embedded in this tweet advertises Microsoft, user\_6's organization. Through this self-promotional tweet, Microsoft is discursively portrayed as a company that provides solutions to those who find abstract technical concepts – such as “blockchain” and “quantum computing”, illustrated in the hashtags – daunting. Notably, the tweet also contains stylistic features that contribute to impression management. The hashtag “#techtectech” emphasizes the organization's investment in and passion for all things “tech”, while the inclusion of the emoji makes them appear playful. Here, the organization's motivation for participating in blockchain talk seems clear: they are an expert with relevant knowledge to offer, and by promoting their expertise in an accessible way they are able to use it for impression management.

This type of practice of individual accounts sharing their employer's or organization's blockchain-related content was frequent in the data, and it was often achieved through retweeting. In general, retweets can have several goals. They may, for example, contain evaluative assessments of the original tweets (Page 2011: 114). According to Su et al. (2017: 576), retweets can also have a “conversational” aspect, in addition to merely disseminating information – as illustrated by our example in 4.2.1, where DigitalistInfo addressed a question from a follower by retweeting. They can also be used to foster social presence (Lim/Lee-Won 2017). Here, one organizational representative interacts with their organization, thus showing support for their employer's activities. At the same time, as user\_6 is publicly associated with Microsoft, they are highlighting their own expertise to their followers.

We also encountered organizations that directly advertised their own blockchain applications:

**Tweet:** “@ArlaSuomi: We have made the production chain of milk exceptionally transparent. Finally, consumers will be able to follow their milk's journey all the way from the farm into the carton. #milk #blockchain #transparency #responsibility #firstintheworld”

**Industry:** Food industry

**Date:** 20 September 2018

Here, the dairy producer Arla Finland is using Twitter to promote their transparent production chain that utilizes blockchain technology. The company's values, such as “transparency” and “responsibility” are highlighted, but they are also constructing themselves as innovative through language use. They are the “first in the world” to do this, which makes them “exceptional” within their field. While most organizations participated in blockchain talk by sharing news and expressing their interest in learning about the technology, some organizations, including Arla, positioned themselves as active creators and innovators.

#### 4.2.5 Resource

Finally, Twitter users also participated in blockchain talk by sharing resources with their followers. For example, tweets featured blockchain-related documents or materials that others might find useful or interesting, such as reports, blog posts, TED Talks, podcasts, scientific articles, and instructional videos, e. g.:

**Tweet:** “@Bittirahafi: We have published a new video “The basics of Bitcoin in 5 minutes’ [link] #bitcoin #bittiraha #blockchain”

**Industry:** Economy/Finance

**Date:** 13 July 2016

While the above example can also be viewed as a promotional tweet, the type of resource shared and highlighted – a video that sums up the “basics” of bitcoin – is significant. As the inclusion of links in tweets is extremely common in Twitter communication (e. g. Su et al 2017), it is likely that followers do not click on all the links they encounter on their timeline. In the above tweet, the video was shared by an account associated with Coinmotion, “a registered virtual currency service provider regulated by the Finnish Financial Supervisory Authority” (Coinmotion 2022). By specifying the resource and emphasizing its benefits – the audience will learn the basics of bitcoin quickly – the organization increases its chances of receiving views, while also constructing their own expertise in relation to bitcoin. Although there was relatively little direct engagement between organizations in the data, our analysis illustrates that organizations’ blockchain talk features both those who request more information (cf. the first two examples in 4.2.1), and those who take a more active role in providing information and resources. Nevertheless, both types of organizations choose to connect themselves to the broader discourse on blockchain on Twitter by using the relevant discursive features, particularly hashtags.

#### 4.3 Relationship between actors and content

In addition to analyzing the tweets’ content, we examined how many tweets were posted by organizations within specific industries. Figure 3 illustrates different industries’ participation in blockchain talk.

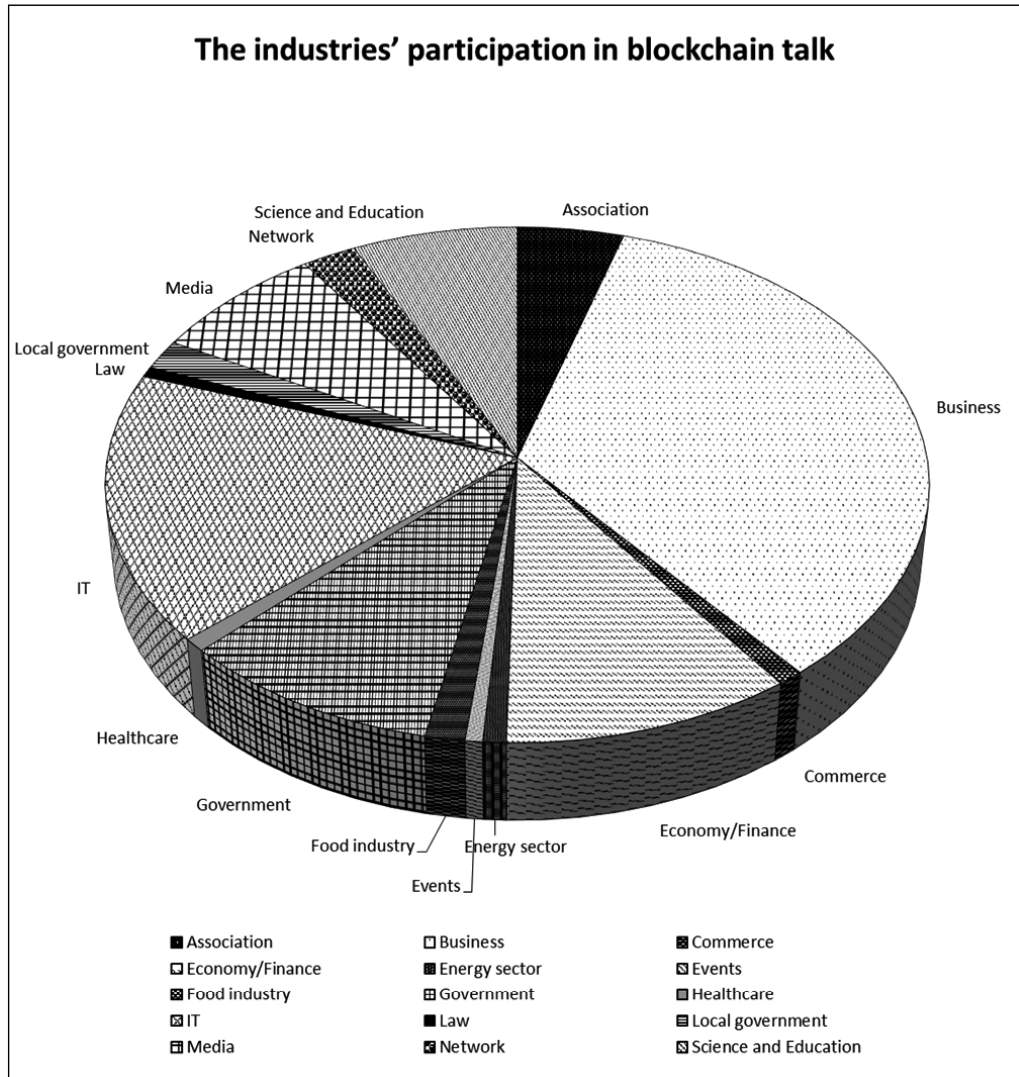


Figure 3: The industries' participation in blockchain talk. This figure illustrates the share of tweets posted using the Finnish hashtag for "blockchain" within specific industries.

By looking at the distribution of the types of tweets in the context of each industry, we were able to get a tentative idea of the relationship between industries and blockchain talk. The percentages of different types of tweets in each industry are displayed in Figure 4 below.

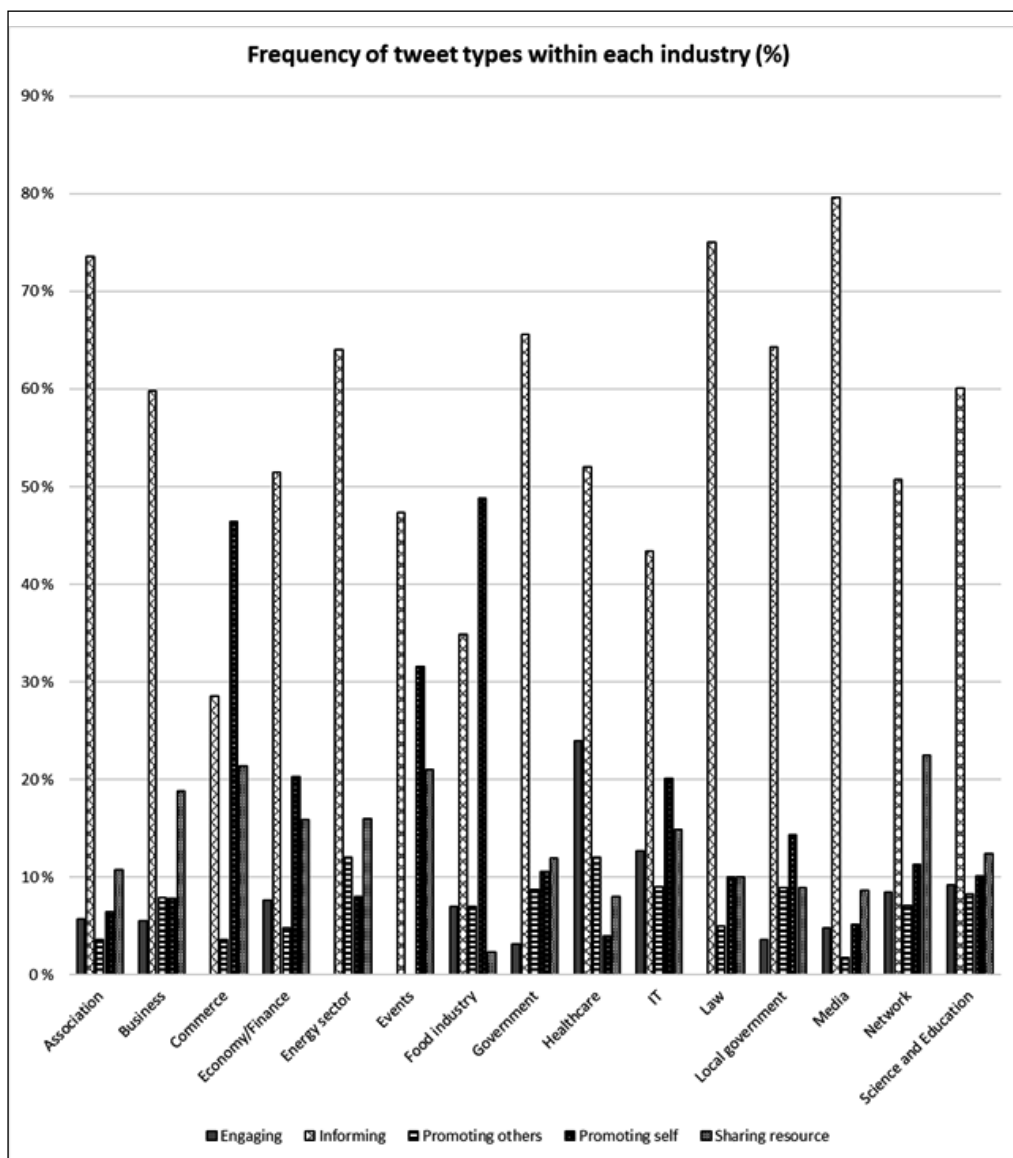


Figure 4: Distribution of tweet types within industries

Figure 4 illustrates that informative tweets were in the majority in most industries that participated in blockchain talk, the only exceptions being commerce and food industry, both of which had the highest percentage of tweets in the category of self-promotion. A possible explanation can be found through examining the actors that were active in these two fields, and their tweets.

Most food industry users and their tweets were connected to the dairy producer Arla Finland, who were promoting an application of blockchain technology to their production chain (see 4.2.4). Thus, blockchain technology in general was not necessarily a popular topic of dis-

cussion among the Finnish food industry, but a specific actor in the field was doing something innovative with blockchain and promoting it on Twitter. Similarly, most users within the commerce category were connected to S Group, a major Finnish wholesale business and a chain including supermarkets, department stores, and other retail shops (S Group 2021). Their tweets promoted S Group's innovation called "kuhatutka" ("zander radar"), an application developed using blockchain technology and used to trace the origin of fish. Like representatives of Arla Finland, the representatives of S Group were tweeting about blockchain because their organization had launched a blockchain-based service. Interestingly, both organizations promoted a blockchain-based innovation linked to transparency and responsibility in food production and supply. Their blockchain talk was connected to organizational values, thus functioning as impression management.

We also observed differences between industries in the engagement category. As illustrated in Figure 4, engaging tweets were absent in commerce, the energy sector, events, and law, while the field of healthcare contained the highest percentage of engagement. This may be due to the fact that building relationships with the public is an important communicative purpose for health organizations (Park/Reber/Chon 2016: 188). For the category of commerce, the lack of engaging tweets may be connected to the fact that the majority of the tweets were centered around S Group's new blockchain application. Event organizers likely focus on promoting/informing people about their event, as this category also contained zero tweets that promoted others. In their study on the Twitter use of science festivals, Su et al. (2017) did find tweets that had participatory features, but the majority of the tweets focused on one-way communication with an emphasis on disseminating information. In our data, tweets from actors in law and the energy sector were also heavily focused on such one-way, information-heavy communication.

## 5 Discussion and conclusion

As we have shown in this study, blockchain talk on Twitter offers organizations plenty of opportunities for impression management. Through blockchain talk, organizations can manifest their expertise and progressiveness, as blockchain is both an abstract technology and an array of practical, experimental applications. By analyzing different types of organizational tweets that contain the Finnish hashtag for "blockchain", we have mapped the range of organizational performers who participated in blockchain talk in the Finnish Twittersphere in 2015–2018, identifying the industries that were involved in this activity. In addition, we have illustrated how the organizational discourse on technological innovation is intertwined with impression management and made visible on Twitter through the use of hashtags.

We conclude that most organizational tweets (58 % of the tweets in our data) participate in blockchain talk by *disseminating information* on blockchain-related topics. However, within specific industries the largest number of tweets was posted by organizations that promoted their own concrete blockchain experiments. Understandably, organizations are more likely to promote themselves than others. Overall, promotional tweets – including both *self-promotion* and the *promotion of others* – made up roughly 20 % of all tweets in the data, while 15 % of the tweets featured the users sharing blockchain-related *resources*. *Engagement* was less common, with 7 % of the tweets aimed for engaging other users in conversation about blockchain. However, we also noted some differences between particular industries in terms of engagement – for example, 24 % of the tweets from healthcare organizations featured engagement. Thus, there is evidence that industries participate in discussions around technological innovation in

specific ways. Further studies are needed to investigate such differences in more detail. Overall, however, the prevalence of the informative tweets indicates that the one-to-many model of communication still prevails in organizational communication on Twitter (e. g. Etter 2014, Lovejoy/Saxton 2012, Okay/Ašanin Gole/Okay 2021, Su et al. 2017), at least in the context of discussions on innovations like blockchain. This is notable because previous research has also demonstrated that dialogic approaches to Twitter communication would benefit organizations (Lim/Lee-Won 2017, Wang/Yang 2020).

As our analysis demonstrated, a practice like blockchain talk can be used to discursively position organizations in relation to technologies and the associated hype. Tweeting about blockchain was used to construct expertise and to highlight organizational values in our data. There were organizations such as Microsoft who appealed to their audience by offering simplified solutions to blockchain, attempting to decrease their stakeholders' presumed fear of complicated technical concepts. Certain organizations, as we saw in the case of Arla Finland and S Group, had also harnessed blockchain to the service of transparency and sustainability, thus turning blockchain talk into value-based communication. Highlighting specific values in such a way can be connected to the "elite-circle" nature of the Finnish Twittersphere, which has been established in previous literature (Ruoho/Kuusipalo 2019).

Finally, it is noteworthy that even those organizations that did not have their own blockchain applications engaged in blockchain talk. This may be because the topic is "trendy" and it allows them to appear as trailblazers – however, further research is required in order to figure out what exactly motivates these organizations. As we demonstrated through the examples, many organizational actors emphasized the fact that they were "new" to blockchain, and their willingness to interact with experts in the field (although direct interactions rarely took place). When it comes to discussing technological innovation, sharing news and general information might be an easy and relatively "safe" way for organizations to engage in impression management. Through mostly informative tweets, organizations can benefit from the "hype" of technological innovation, without having to invest their resources in actual applications of the technology. However, as illustrated by the presence of some engagement between users and the promotion of others in the data, Twitter also allows organizations to form and maintain ties with other organizations by showing support and building dialogue, which can also function as impression management.

By discursively emphasizing aspects such as reliability, relatability and transparency in their social media communication, organizations can strengthen their public image in the eyes of their stakeholders. Interestingly, while such positive organizational values were associated with blockchain talk in our data, the tweets did not contain much explicit problematization of the technology. For the most part, the organizations who tweeted about blockchain technology either adopted a "neutral" stance towards it, or highlighted its benefits instead of potential challenges (Lynn/Rosati/Fox 2018). For instance, the Finnish word for "environment" only occurred in sixteen tweets in the data, which illustrates that, at least during the time period under investigation in our study, organizations did not engage in much critical discussion on the environmental concerns related to blockchain technology (e. g. Polemis/Tsionas 2021).

The present study can be considered exploratory and focuses on the perspective of the organizational accounts which tweeted using the hashtag #blockchain – in other words, those who send out messages to their intended audience. In the future, further explorations into the role of this intended audience from a stakeholder perspective are needed. When tweeting about blockchain technology, or similar technological advancements, do organizations aim



to address and influence customers, competitors, and/or even political decision-makers? Is blockchain talk in-group communication, or do these organizations truly aim to participate in broader public discussions? Such questions could be answered by studying, for example, the audience reception of tweets through a closer examination of likes and retweets.

This article has focused on a specific geographical and cultural context: Finland and the Finnish Twittersphere. In addition, our focus has been on early blockchain discourse, as the data was collected from the first three years following the appearance of the Finnish hashtag for #blockchain on Twitter. While these local and temporal foci can be viewed as limitations, they can also be considered a strength, as they have allowed us to gain a more profound understanding of the roles of specific organizations and their strategic orientation towards both blockchain technology and the use of Twitter in organizational communication. In the future, comparisons between local and global practices of engaging in discussions around technological innovations are necessary in order to understand how new technologies (e. g. Artificial Intelligence, NFTs) are introduced, negotiated, and utilized in the discursive context of social media.

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# The Dynamics of Turn-taking in Meetings of the Federal Open Market Committee

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**Abstract** This article complements previous research on meeting interaction and turn-taking by focusing on domain-specific language use in a highly specialised context within economics, namely deliberations on monetary policy held by the Federal Open Market Committee in the United States (FOMC). The aim of this research is to explore the ways in which turn-taking is regulated in the context of FOMC discourse, specifically by identifying linguistic forms that are associated with turn-transitions and regular meeting functions such as opening the meeting, transition to new agenda item, vote-taking and closing of meeting, and documenting how these forms are used by chair and delegates in turn allocation through next speaker selection/self-selection. We take a corpus-based and discourse-analytic approach that entails a large-scale charting of words and phrases in a recently compiled corpus of meeting transcripts of approx. 6.9 million words covering the period from 2002 to 2016. Turn-taking is constrained in ways that are characteristic of the meeting genre, and chair and delegates perform partially distinct roles. Although the chairperson has a particular role in regulating the distribution of turns, the attendees also contribute to the regulation. Turn transitions tend to co-occur with speech acts specific to the interactional setting, such as thanking for the right to speak, addressing a designated speaker, expressing agreement, asking for clarification, ensuring co-participation from others, etc. Much of the interaction and turn-taking is steered through the use of formulaic expressions, many of which reveal the relative formality of these deliberations.

**Keywords:** Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), meeting interaction, monetary policy, turn-taking

## 1 Introduction

Scholarship on the language used in professional and occupational settings belongs “in the mainstream of contemporary applied linguistics” (McGroarty 2010: 341), as it can serve a crucial function by contributing to our understanding of the complexities and regularities that characterise the performance of work-related tasks. It is well established that language plays a pivotal role as a form of activity that represents and contributes in various ways to the accomplishment of corporate and organisational goals. At the same time, language use manifests the social realities experienced by workers and the asymmetries in the power and status of participants in work-related discourse. Meetings are a spoken genre of particular interest, in which the hierarchical role differentiation among participants can be more or less explicitly manifested depending on corporate, national and local culture, the significance and regularity of the meeting, and a variety of other factors. This article complements previous research on

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meeting interaction and turn-taking by focusing on domain-specific language use in a highly specialised context within economics, namely deliberations on monetary policy held by the United States' Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC),<sup>1</sup> which plays a central role in US monetary policy. For the purposes of this article and subsequent research, we have compiled the records from 2002–2016 into a corpus of approx. 6.9 million words and made this available in the text analysis software Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2004, cf. also section 3).

Turn-taking is essential to all varieties of spoken discourse, and it can be regarded as a micro-level phenomenon where verbal and visual (facial/gestural) stimuli are applied in socially and culturally regulated ways to manage the distribution of talk in a flow of spoken discourse. While there is considerable accumulated knowledge about how turn-taking works in ordinary conversation and, to a lesser degree, in specialised contexts (section 2), little is known of how it is regulated in such a task-oriented and high-stakes context as the deliberations of a central bank. Turn-taking dynamics makes for an interesting case, since it may shed light on the context-specific features and practices of deliberations, such as the enactment of power relations, the assigned roles, rights and obligations of delegates, how decision-making is performed, etc. Our aim is therefore to explore the ways in which turn-taking is regulated in the specialised genre of chaired meetings of the FOMC, specifically by identifying linguistic forms that are associated with turn-transitions and regular meeting functions such as opening the meeting, transition to new agenda item, vote-taking and closing of meeting, and documenting how these forms are used by chair and delegates in turn allocation through next speaker selection/self-selection. Previous studies of turn-taking have mostly been carried out in the framework of conversation analysis as detailed studies of individual speech events. We propose an alternative approach of exploring the systematic nature of turn-taking across a series of speech events represented in a large corpus. Thus, this contribution also aims to showcase how interactive features that characterise the meeting genre can be viewed from the perspective of Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS), an approach that relies on computer-aided methodology for the study of naturally occurring discourse (Gillings/Mautner/Baker 2023). We exemplify this approach through a large-scale, bottom-up procedure for charting turn-relevant sequences of words and phrases. In this approach, turn shifts are identified as repetitive lexico-grammatical patterns that map systematically onto the turn-taking structure of this spoken genre. In turn, observations deriving from the bottom-up approach form the basis for a qualitative analysis of individual turn shifts.

The article is organised as follows. We firstly, in section 2, give an outline of some of the previous research on turn-taking in workplace meetings and other LSP contexts. Next, in section 3 we briefly describe the corpus and how we have exploited the corpus metadata to facilitate the study of turn-taking in the Sketch Engine. In section 4, we explore the dynamics of turn-taking in the corpus as a whole, first by surveying some recurrent patterns relevant to turn-taking (section 4.1), next by highlighting some turn-taking sequences that appear to be specific for this spoken genre (section 4.2). Finally, section 5 offers a concluding discussion of the findings and some possible future pathways for research based on the FOMC corpus.

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<sup>1</sup> Terminology applied in the article: *FOMCD* – Federal Open Market Committee deliberations/discourse; *chair* – the chairperson/chairman; *delegate* – any non-chair member partaking in an FOMCD.

## 2 Interaction and turn-taking in meetings

Studies of professional discourse practices in corporate and organisational settings have increased our knowledge of how interaction works, among others, in business negotiations (Andersen 2012, Bargiela-Chiappini/Harris 1997, Jensen 2009, Rogerson-Revell 2007), job interviews (Kerekes 2006, White 1994), service encounters (Leidner 1993, Watson 1997), and earnings calls (Hirsto/Koskela/Penttinen 2022). Most relevant to the current contribution, interaction in meetings has been explored via studies that discuss, for instance, the role of the chair (Angouri/Marra 2010), aspects of interculturality and multilingualism (Cook 2011, Harris/Bargiela-Chiappini 2003, Koskela/Pilke 2016, Liu/Liu 2017, Murata 2014, Rogerson-Revell 2007), and the display and negotiation of identity and gender (Clifton/Van De Mieroop 2010, Ford 2008, Vöge 2010). Previous studies zoom in on particular tasks-at-hand in meetings, such as problem solving and disagreement management (Angouri 2012), decision making (Halvorsen/Sarangı 2015, Wodak 2000), task assignment (Svennevig/Djordjilovic 2015), and joint text production (Nissi 2015). Specific discursive aspects of meeting interactions that have been studied include humour and laughter (Markaki et al. 2010, Murata 2014, Rogerson-Revell 2007, Vöge 2010), reported speech (Koester/Handford 2018), markers of response and common ground (Andersen 2012, Liu/Liu 2017), and honorifics (Cook 2011).

An array of studies account for the general characteristics of meetings including the way turn-taking is organised (Asmuß/Svennevig 2009, Chen/Brandt 2021, Ford 2008, Larrue/Trognon 1993, Munalim/Genuino 2021, Oittinen/Piirainen-Marsh 2015, Svennevig 2012). Schwartzman (1989) defines a meeting as “a communicative event involving three or more people who agree to assemble for a purpose ostensibly related to the functioning of an organ or group, for example, to exchange ideas or opinions, to solve a problem, to make a decision or negotiate an agreement, to develop policy and procedures, to formulate recommendations, and so forth” (Schwartzman 1989: 7). Meetings are a noteworthy genre for several reasons. From the point of view of management of organisations, their significance is captured by Boden (1994), who observes that meetings are “*the* interaction order of management, the occasioned expression of management-in-action, that very social action through which institutions produce and reproduce themselves” (Boden 1994: 81, emphasis in original). From the point of view of language and interaction, meetings are interesting as a conversational genre, in that they “constitute a specific speech exchange system, with special and characteristic norms and conventions regarding such things as turn-taking, sequence organization and topic progression” (Svennevig 2012: 4). The main situational and interactional characteristics of this genre are (i) the pre-specified purpose or goal; (ii) the role of the chair, and closely connected with this role, (iii) the organisation of topics and (iv) the system for management of turns (see below). Furthermore, meetings are often inherently multimodal, involving not just the interacting participants but also typically associated artefacts such as a designated meeting room, slide presentations and whiteboards and dependence on certain written documents such as agendas and minutes (Djordjilovic 2012, Moore/Whalen/Gathman 2010). Finally, from the point of view of social roles and relationships, meetings are also the prime setting in which social and hierarchical roles are manifested (Putnam/Fairhurst 2001, Taylor 2006).

As with other spoken genres, turn-taking is managed locally by participants on a turn-by-turn basis. According to Greatbach (1988), “it is now widely accepted that the turn-taking systems used in institutional settings are the product of systematic transformations of the one used for mundane conversation” (Greatbach 1988: 420). The seminal study by Sacks/Sche-

gloff/Jefferson (1974) describes the organisation of turn-taking in ordinary conversation in terms of the allocation, ordering, length and content of turns at talk. Turns are exchanged at transition-relevance places, where the transfer of speakership is affected by means of one of two rules, either through the rule that current speaker selects next speaker, or that the next speaker self-selects. It is clear from research on institutional talk that different contexts of use have different systems for pre-allocation of turns according to participant roles (Atkinson/Drew 1979, Larrue/Trognon 1993). For instance, in specialised genres such as news interviews (Greatbach 1988), doctor-patient interaction (West 2010), and courtroom interaction (Anesa 2009, Atkinson/Drew 1979) it has been shown that turn-taking is highly standardised (cf. also Heffer 2008).

Similarly, the normative practices that are constitutive of meetings raise expectations among the participants of a certain distribution of roles and ordering of events. In an early study of meeting openings, Atkinson/Cuff/Lee (1978) observe that a meeting chair will typically signal a shift from pre-meeting talk to the initiation of a meeting with a topic transition marker – for instance a discourse marker such as *okay* produced with a notably loud volume – or to state a greeting or welcome, or the like (Atkinson/Cuff/Lee 1978, Oittinen/Piirainen-Marsh 2015). The chair has special rights and obligations in facilitating and controlling the contribution of the participants in two main ways, by assuring the topical progression and by managing the participants' access to the floor, thus functioning as the switchboard of the interaction (Boden 1994). These tasks can be enacted in quite different ways according to the degree of formality of the meeting and differences in management styles or underlying hierarchical structures. Thus, a chair may to different degrees encourage or grant participants the right to participate on their own in steering the discussion and developing interpersonal relations (Pomerantz/Denvir 2007), e. g. by allowing for digressions (Holmes/Stubbe 2015) or social talk and humour (Kangasharju/Nikko 2009, Markaki et al. 2010, Vaughan 2008). Alternatively, they may choose to exercise an authoritative leadership style with a more structured and controlling way of chairing meetings (Holmes/Schnurr/Marra 2007).

Turn-taking in chaired meetings is generally distinguishable from everyday conversation in that an appointed chair has the formal right and responsibility to manage the interaction between participants. However, “in most meetings there will be a mixture of self-selection by the speakers and preallocation of turns by the chair” (Asmuß/Svennevig 2009: 14). In formal meetings, participants will typically signal their wish to speak to the chair. As Ford (2008) observes, making a bid for a turn is typically done by a combination of non-verbal signals and gestures such as leaning forward, gazing towards the chair or a co-participant, and raising one's hand (Chen/Brandt 2021, Ford 2008). The chair will not only allocate turns but also monitor them and sanction departures from norms of turn length or topical relevance. In informal meetings, turn allocation resembles that of ordinary conversation, with more self-selection and next-turn allocation by the current speaker and less overt management by the chair, who exercises the role in a way that is “supportive and collegial rather than competitive or disruptive” (Munalim/Genuino 2021: 43). Ford (2008) also observes that speakers often produce extensions of a previous speaker's turn, taking the role as co-authors of a contribution to an issue and aligning as a team with the previous speaker. In such joint contributions, participants are often seen to prepare the ground for their self-selection by means of non-verbal actions such as nodding and making eye contact.

Another central function associated with the chair is their role in topic transition, i. e. closing a topic and moving on to the next agenda item. A fixed agenda entails some degree



of pre-allocation of turns to participants with designated roles, such as manager, expert, employee, etc. In contrast with the regularity of ordinary conversation, participants may tie their contribution not to the previous speaker but to the agenda point under discussion. Asmuß/Svennevig (2009: 15) point out that the result of such agenda-based pre-allocation can be turns that are monological in nature and much longer than what is normally justified in ordinary conversation. A variety of expressions can be used as prefaces or transitional beginnings (Asmuß/Svennevig 2009) – metalinguistic expressions that signify the topical relevance of the contribution, such as *I wanted to address the issue of X*, or that tie the contribution to previous talk, such as *with regard to what Y said*.

A prominent feature of meeting talk is the relative power assigned to and enacted by the chair, resulting in interactional asymmetry. This may materialise in a discussion, for instance, in the form of a pre-closing statement by the chair and a formulation of gist (Barnes 2007) or a question whether everyone agrees (Sandlund/Denk 2007). Such utterances serve a key function of presenting a conclusion as a collaborative achievement and a common understanding of the issue at hand. They are thus a powerful tool that gives the chair “an opportunity to ‘fix’ their version of reality and have it endorsed by the co-participants” (Svennevig 2012: 7, cf. also Clifton 2006). It is generally the case that such gist formulations or summarising questions are not explicitly responded to but treated as having been silently accepted. In fact, in such contexts “it is the silence of the group that constitutes the preferred and sufficient response” (Asmuß/Svennevig 2009: 13). Finally, the chair will be expected to close the meeting, often via explicit pre-closing sequences that allow the participants to re-open discussion or introduce additional topics (e. g. *Any other comments?*) and finalising speech acts such as thanking or formally adjourning the meeting, at which point the floor is generally open for less formal post-meeting talk (Boden 1994).

There are, in other words, a set of characteristics that distinguish turn-taking in meetings from ordinary conversation, although the former is regarded as the product of systematic transformations of the latter (Greatbach 1988: 402). But not all meetings are equal, and there is a discernible continuum of degrees of formality of meetings, fixedness of roles and strictness of turn-taking regulation. The systematic differences between meetings and ordinary conversation result from constraints on the production of turns, i. e. particular types of turns are pre-allocated to speakers with specific institutional roles and identities. This is due to the legal, institutional and social expectations regarding how such meetings evolve. As for the meeting interaction in FOMCD, it is the product of discussions at a high organisational level with much at stake due to the role of the FOMC in exercising monetary regulations. The monetary policy of the United States, and thus the outcome of these meetings, often has global repercussions for the world’s economy. FOMCD constitutes a particular genre of expert-to-expert communication within a particular domain with its institutionalised vocabulary, rituals and procedures. The institutional and societal significance of this series of meetings would suggest that the FOMC genre is located at the relatively fixed end of the continuum of formality and strictness, but probably less so than other types of discourse such as parliamentary debates and courtroom interaction (Anesa 2009), let alone rituals and ceremonies. Against this background, we address these research questions in this study:

RQ1: What characterises the specialised genre of chaired meetings of the FOMC in terms of the way turn-taking is regulated?

RQ2: What are the roles of chair and delegates in turn allocation and next speaker selection/self-selection?

RQ3: What linguistic forms are associated with turn-transitions and regular meeting functions such as opening the meeting, transition to new agenda item, vote-taking, and closing of meeting?

As briefly mentioned in section 1 and further elaborated below, our approach relies mainly on Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (e. g. Ädel/Reppen 2008). A main assumption underlying this approach is that recurrent discursive patterns and token frequencies can provide a good empirical basis for making generalisations about the organisation of a particular discourse genre/context. We describe the discernible and systematic patterns of turn management that emerge in a largely corpus-driven approach, in which frequency data are used inductively to identify realisations of turn-taking actions and lexico-grammatical devices used to signal turn transition and acceptance of turn (section 4). Our approach includes both describing these at the macro level by looking at the totality of corpus data (4.1), and also at the micro level by highlighting individual instances of turn-taking phenomena (4.2).

### 3 Material and methods

#### 3.1 *The FOMC*

The Federal Open Market Committee is a division of the Federal Reserve System in the United States. The FOMC makes key decisions about monetary policy, specifically open market operations and the federal funds target range, that influence interest rates and money supply. According to the “Federal Open Market Committee. Rules and Authorizations”, the FOMC seeks to fulfil “its statutory mandate from the Congress of promoting maximum employment, stable prices, and moderate long-term interest rates” (Board of Governors 2022: 4). The committee consists of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, and four presidents of other district Reserve Banks. These four members serve one-year terms on a rotating basis. In addition to the 12 voting members, the presidents of the other regional Feds also take part in the discussions. Meetings are held on a regular basis, usually eight times a year. Before each meeting, the Federal Reserve staff prepares several documents that serve as the basis for the discussions. Prior to discussing the monetary policy, a presentation on the current state of the economy is given by staff members. Following that presentation, the economic situation in the US, the condition of the financial markets and international financial developments are discussed. Decisions are made by a majority vote that follows a thorough discussion of a topic.

The communication situation is characterised by the fact that all meeting participants are experts in the same discipline, namely economics. For Kalverkämper (1998), this communicative constellation, when experts in a domain communicate with other experts from the same domain about their domain, is a prototypical form of specialised communication. With a detailed breakdown, one could of course argue that finance and economics, as the likely backgrounds of the participants, are separate disciplines. For the present study, however, we assume that the boundaries of the subject are so broad that the communication situation can be regarded as an instance of intra-domain (expert-to-expert) communication.

### 3.2 Data

After each FOMC meeting, transcripts are prepared, based on tape recordings, “lightly editing the speakers’ original words, where necessary, to facilitate the reader’s understanding” (FOMC n.d.). Due to the potentially huge impact that the content of transcripts might have on the economy, they are kept under lock and key for five years before they are published on the FOMC website. The latest available transcripts at the time of data collection were from 2016. Historically, transcripts are available back to the 1930s. For this study, it was decided to focus on contemporary communication, and for practical reasons a period from 2002 until 2016 was chosen. As briefly described above, during turn allocation, non-verbal signals and gestures commonly occur. However, these are not registered in the transcriptions, so they are not included in our analysis.

After downloading the 121 meeting transcripts from the time range 2002 to 2016, several pre-processing steps were applied:

1. The pdf files were converted to plain text and those sections of the documents that were not part of the actual transcript were removed. For instance, each file starts with information about the time and place of the meeting, as well as a list of all participants. This information, usually the first 2-3 pages, was removed as well as the page headers that contain the meeting date and page numbers.
2. Meta-information was gathered and added to each file: the meeting date, the name of the meeting participant speaking and his/her gender. The following excerpt exemplifies the format of an utterance after the pre-processing:  
CHAIRMAN GREENSPAN.<participant gender="male" name="CHAIRMAN GREENSPAN."> Thank you. Should I make an inaugural speech?</participant>
3. The resulting XML file was uploaded to the Sketch Engine and tagged for part of speech.

With the information added in the pre-processing, the query results in the Sketch Engine can be linked to these dimensions:

- Part of speech
- Name of the participant speaking
- Gender of the participant speaking
- Meeting date

The final corpus has a size of approximately 6.9 million words.

### 3.3 Corpus Query Language (CQL)

The Sketch Engine offers several ways to query a corpus, by searching for words, lemmas or phrases. The most flexible query mode is based on the CQL search syntax that allows for regular expressions. While simple searches for specific lemmas or phrases reveal insights into the frequency of these lexical items, such a query is not suitable to detect structural features in the corpus, such as part of speech or meta-information that is encoded in the corpus. For the study of turn-taking, the relevant passages in the corpus are the ones in the transition of one speaker to another speaker. CQL enables us to identify exactly those passages. As shown in the excerpt above, each turn of a speaker is enclosed in a structural mark-up <participant>. While the sentence to the right of an opening <participant> tag matches turn-initial sentences, the

left of a closing <participant> tag matches turn final-sentences. The regular expressions used for the identification are:

- <participant> <s/> for turn initial sentences
- <s/> </participant> for turn final sentences

In addition, it turned out while analysing the matches of the query, that there is a considerable amount of matches where the turn consists of only one sentence. These matches will appear both as turn initial and as turn final sentences. It was decided to add a third category of one-sentence turns to the analysis by searching for the following structural sequence:

<participant> <s/> </participant>

Note that what is marked by the part of speech tagger as a sentence is not necessarily a grammatically well-formed sentence containing a verb. In many cases it is just one word, e. g. a name (see section 4.1).

The subsequent identification and analysis of recurrent words and phrases followed a 3-step procedure which is described in detail in section 4.1.

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Quantitative analysis

This section looks into the phraseology of meetings as it emerges in the FOMC corpus, with a specific focus on phrases that are related to the management of turns in meetings. Given that formal meetings are routinised events, we can expect there to be regularity in the form of recurrence of fixed phrases, some of which have the function to organise the sequence of turns in chaired meetings. The organisation and management of meetings in public institutions is usually subject to relatively strict guidelines, such as those codified in “Robert’s Rules of Order” (Robert et al. 2020), a manual on parliamentary procedures, which was first published in 1911 and is now in its 12th revised edition. Although, to our knowledge, there is no clear guide to the use of “Robert’s Rules of Order” in FOMC meetings, several transcripts make explicit reference to these rules when meeting participants discuss the correct course of action. Among other things, it is regulated in “Robert’s Rules of Order” how the individual items on the agenda are processed and how decisions are made. All these actions are closely linked to linguistic formulations. When used properly, there is little room for variation within the phrases, and the meeting participants, especially those that chair the meeting or function as a secretary, have to learn them. One excerpt from the FOMC corpus exemplifies this. In the following sequence of turns, the chair of the meeting, Janet Yellen, explains the use of the phrase *so moved* to a delegate.

[1] CHAIR YELLEN. [...] So with respect to the Board meeting, I need a motion to close the meeting. [Aside to Governor Fischer] “So moved.” Remember, I told you, it is an assigned job.

MR. FISCHER. So it’s always “so moved”? There’s no variation?

CHAIR YELLEN. No, that’s it.

MR. FISCHER. No variation. All right.

CHAIR YELLEN. Thank you. And then I say, “Without objection.” (FOMC: 2014-06-17)

For the present study, the recurrent fixed phrases were identified following a 3-step procedure: First, a concordance with all phrases that match the CQL-queries described in section 3.3 was generated. Based on that concordance, a frequency list was compiled. Finally, in order to facilitate reading of the table, some of the phrases were aggregated based on the word form. This applies to three categories of items in the frequency list.

- **First names:** All phrases that contained only a first name were aggregated into the item [First name]. Identification is based on a list of the 5,000 most frequent first names in the US.
- **Title + surname:** The phrases that contained a title followed by a surname were aggregated into the item [Title] [Name]. The identification is based on a regular expression. Examples are *Chairman Greenspan* and *President Yellen*.
- **“Thank you”:** All phrases that contained variations of *thank you* were aggregated into the item “Thank you”.

By inspecting Table 1 through Table 3, it can be seen that there is a highly skewed distribution of the individual phrases in all three positional categories we considered (turn-initial, turn-final and turns with only one sentence). In each category, some phrases are extremely frequent, while most phrases are much less frequent. The top five items in the respective categories account for more than 40 % of all turn-initial phrase tokens (Table 1), more than 30 % of all turn-final phrase tokens (Table 2) and about 30 % of all phrases in turns that consist of only one sentence (Table 3).

Phrase	n
Thank you. (aggregated)	8799
Okay.	1064
Yes.	644
Right.	286
All right.	193
No.	99
Other questions?	87
Without objection.	71
Good morning, everybody.	70
That’s right.	58
I’m sorry.	44
Sure.	43
I see.	40
[Title] [Name] (aggregated)	32
Any other questions?	31

Table 1: Turn initial phrases: Top 15

Phrase	n
[Title] [Name] (aggregated)	4341
Thank you. (aggregated)	3983
[First name] (aggregated)	110
That concludes my prepared remarks.	48
Is that correct?	38
That completes my prepared remarks.	37
Okay.	31
Is that right?	22
The meeting is adjourned.	22
Yes.	22
Do I have a motion?	20
All right.	17
Sorry.	14
That concludes our prepared remarks.	14
Go ahead.	13

Table 2: Turn final phrases: Top 15

Phrase	n
[Title] [Name] (aggregated)	2967
Thank you. (aggregated)	617
Yes.	440
Right.	174
Okay.	150
So moved.	147
Second.	56
No.	44
So move.	41
That's right.	40
[First name] (aggregated)	36
Sure.	33
Absolutely.	30
That's correct.	29
Exactly.	27

Table 3: Turns with only one sentence: Top 15

This regularity is further explored in the subsections below. The quantitative analysis focuses on the categories that we find most relevant for turn-taking and zooms in on variations of “thank you”, phrases that consist of a name, and phrases related to procedural rules.

#### 4.1.1 Variations of “thank you”

In terms of frequency, the phrases that contain variations of “thank you” are among the most prominent ones, but they are unequally distributed. Table 4 shows the distribution of “thank you” over the three positional categories of turns.

Turn category	n “thank you”	% of turns in category
turn-initial	8,799	34.3
turn-final	3,983	15.9
one-sentence turn	617	4.5

Table 4: Distribution of phrases containing variations of “thank you”

About 34 % or 8,799 of all phrases that open a turn contain some variation of “thank you”. Among the most frequent variations identified are *Thank you*, *Thanks*, *Thank you Mr. Chairman / Madam Chair*, and *Thank you [Name]*.

There are two main uses of turn-initial “thank you” in our material. These are connected to the role of the meeting participant. Table 5 shows the distribution of turn initial variations of “thank you” for meeting chairs and for delegates.

Participant category	n “thank you”	% of turn initial “thank you”
meeting chair	3,830	43.5
delegates	4,969	56.5

Table 5: Turn initial uses of variations of “thank you” aggregated by category of meeting participant

There are 3,830 occurrences, or about 43 % of all turn initial occurrences of “thank you”, that are uttered by a meeting chair. In these uses, the meeting chair typically thanks a delegate for a contribution (see 4.2). In [2] Ms. Yellen has given a longer presentation of a topic. When she is finished, the meeting chair thanks her for this.

[2] MS. YELLEN. ... It is unlikely that we will be able to sharpen our assessment of these risks very much until more time passes and more data become available.

CHAIRMAN BERNANKE. **Thank you.** (FOMC: 2006-06-29)

When variations of “thank you” are used by delegates to open a turn, they frequently serve the function of thanking the meeting chair or another participant for getting the floor, as in [3].

[3] MS. MINEHAN. Actually, I think Vice Chair Geithner was slightly ahead of me.

VICE CHAIRMAN GEITHNER. No, go ahead.

MS. MINEHAN. **Thank you.** (FOMC: 2006-12-12)

When the meeting chair gives the floor to another participant, it is usual to append “Madam Chair” or “Mr. Chairman” in the answer, as in [4].

[4] CHAIR YELLEN. President Kocherlakota.

MR. KOCHERLAKOTA. **Thank you,** Madam Chair. (FOMC: 2015-06-17)

The phrases *Thank you* and *Thank you Madam Chair / Mr. Chairman* have a considerable number of matches and can thus be seen as recurrent fixed phrases.

Other, less frequent forms of turn-initial “thank you” include thanking for some kind of action other than being given the floor. These uses are similar to the one in [2] above, but since the acknowledged action is not immediately preceding, there are often additional explanations why the acknowledgement is given. This is exemplified in [5].

[5] CHAIR YELLEN. My **thanks** to everyone for a thoughtful round of comments on the incoming data, the outlook, and the associated risks. (FOMC: 2016-01-27)

These patterns vary considerably and cannot be regarded as equally fixed as the ones above.

Also in turn-final position, the variations of “thank you” are frequent and their aggregated frequency accounts for about 16 % of all turn-final phrases, as shown in Table 4 above. In turn-final position “thank you” typically ends a longer monologue or presentation and signals that the contribution has come to an end and that the meeting chair can take the floor, as in [6].

[6] MS. HOLCOMB. ... Finally, with respect to the proposals on communicating the details for implementation at liftoff, I think the proposal presented is very sensible, and I support proceeding as described. **Thank you.** (FOMC: 2015-06-17)

In the third category, turns that consist of only one sentence, the variations of “thank you” occur as the second most frequent item, as Table 3 above shows. Typically, a preceding presentation or a contribution in a discussion is acknowledged, similar to the occurrences in turn-initial position.

#### 4.1.2 Phrases that consist of a name

A very frequent pattern in the material are phrases that either only consist of a first name or a combination of a title (*Mr., Ms., President*, etc.) and a surname. Furthermore, these items are unequally distributed among the positional categories, as shown in Table 6.

Turn category	n “Name”	% of turns in category
turn-initial	33	0.1
turn-final	4451	17.7
one-sentence turn	3003	21.8

Table 6: Phrases made up of only a first name or a title and a surname

Although there are 33 matches for phrases that open a turn by only mentioning a name, or a combination of title and a name, these uses must be regarded less conventional as they only account for about 0.1 % of all turn initial phrases. One use that is found in the corpus is when a meeting participant signals that he talks directly to another meeting participant, as in [7].

[7] CHAIRMAN BERNANKE. **President Fisher.** There you go. I can always count on President Fisher to make a statement. (FOMC: 2010-09-21)

While less frequent in turn-initial position, the combinations of a title and a name, or just the first name, are highly frequent in turn-final position. About 18 % of the phrases that end a turn are mentions of a name. The use of these phrases is almost exclusively restricted to situations where one meeting participant gives the floor to another meeting participant, as in [8].

[8] CHAIR YELLEN. Okay. The floor is open for questions. **President Kocherlakota.**

MR. KOCHERLAKOTA. Thank you, Madam Chair. (FOMC: 2015-09-17)

In this respect, mentioning the name of the participant who is given the floor is the most common means to organise the turn-taking.

A variation of that use is to only state the name, so that the whole turn only consists of the first name or a combination of title and surname, as in [9].

[9] CHAIRMAN BERNANKE. **Brian.**

MR. MADIGAN. I just want to make one point to the Vice Chairman’s question. (FOMC: 2008-03-18)



In fact, out of the approximately 14,000 one-sentence turns that are identified, 3,003, or about 22 %, are turns that only mention the name. In this respect, one important characteristic of one-sentence turns is to organise the interaction by allocating turns. This is further elaborated on in the next subsection.

4.1.3 Phrases related to procedural rules

As already exemplified in [1] above, FOMC meetings adhere to a relatively strict set of procedural rules that have to be learned by the meeting participants. The rules often have a linguistic manifestation with relatively fixed phrases or terms. Table 7 gives an overview of the phrases that are related to the procedural rules of the meeting:

Discourse function	Form	n
Request for decision	I need a motion. Do I have a motion? Is there a motion? Is there a second? Can we have/get a second?	113
Accept motion	So move(d). Without objection. (I) second.	394
End the meeting	The meeting is adjourned.	29
Finalise scripted talk	This concludes my prepared remarks.	128

Table 7: Discourse functions of phrases related to procedural rules

In terms of frequency, these phrases represent only a small share of the total of identified phrases. Table 8 shows the distribution over the three positional categories.

Turn category	n “procedural rules”	% of turns in category
turn-initial	127	0.5
turn-final	251	1.0
one-sentence turn	286	2.1

Table 8: Usage of phrases related to procedural rules

To exemplify, a typical sequence of turns would include the chair asking for a motion in the last sentence of their turn. Another meeting participant would utter *so moved* in a one-sentence turn, and the chair again would say *without objection* before continuing with the next matter. [10] exemplifies this.

[10] CHAIR YELLEN. I do need a vote to ratify domestic open market operations. Is there a **motion**?

VICE CHAIRMAN DUDLEY. **So moved.**

CHAIR YELLEN. **Without objection.** Thanks. We’re going to move along now to our discussion of normalization tools ... (FOMC: 2015-03-18)

Some motions need to be endorsed preliminary to discussion. In that case a meeting participant asks for a second and one or several others say *I second*, as in [11].

[11] MR. STEIN. I would like to nominate Janet Yellen.

MR. TARULLO. Is there a **second**?

MR. POWELL. I **second** that nomination. (FOMC: 2014-01-29)

Except for the phrases that are part of a dyadic sequence between two speakers in the process of decision-making, the material contains another fixed phrase that signals a change of speaker. One characteristic of FOMC meetings is that the staff gives presentations to the board members about topics such as the state of the economy. These presentations are often ended by the phrase *That concludes my prepared remarks*, which signals the chair that the floor may be given to another speaker, as further shown in section 4.2.

#### 4.2 Qualitative analysis

The concordance and frequency functions provide a good way of charting recurrent patterns in the sequential organisation of this type of discourse. This section aims to show that the turn-taking is constrained in ways that are characteristic of the discourse genre of a chaired meeting, exemplified by salient turn-regulating mechanisms expressed in the recurrent patterns outlined in section 4.1.

##### 4.2.1 Opening the meeting

The opening turn of an FOMCD is pre-allocated to the chair.

[12] CHAIR YELLEN. **Good afternoon**, everyone. I would like to, again, **welcome** First Vice Presidents Holcomb and Prichard, who are representing Dallas and Philadelphia. My understanding is that Patrick Harker will take office as president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia on July 1. So this is likely to be Blake's last meeting, and I want to **thank you very much** for representing Philadelphia today and at the most recent two meetings. I'd also like to **welcome** back Brian Madigan, who has been selected through notation vote to serve as Secretary of the FOMC for a term that began on June 4. As I mentioned at the previous meeting, Brian will have oversight responsibility for the FOMC Secretariat and **will be playing a key role in the production of minutes and transcripts** of the FOMC meetings. These are duties that Brian has ably performed in the past and is uniquely qualified to fulfill. And, obviously, Brian is no stranger to this room. Finally, I'd like to also **welcome** Michael Strine to his first FOMC meeting. Michael, who currently serves as an executive vice president and head of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's Corporate Group, will become the first vice president of the New York Fed on July 1 and will also become an alternate voter of this Committee at that point. So, Brian and Michael, **welcome**, and we look forward to working with both of you. **Let's turn now to our agenda**, and **the first item** is going to be the Desk report. But before we do that, we're going to be considering this first topic in a joint meeting of the FOMC and the Board, as usual. So **I need a motion to close the Board meeting**.

MR. FISCHER. **So moved.**

CHAIR YELLEN. **Thank you. Without objection.** And now, let me call on Simon to deliver the Desk report. (FOMC: 2015-06-17)

As can be seen from the extract, this rather detailed opening sequence serves a number of discourse functions (highlighted). Typically associated with this stage of the discourse are the speech acts of *greeting* the participants and *welcoming* certain delegates attending their first meeting. On this occasion, Chair Yellen is also *thanking* a departing delegate while *informing* the remaining participants of the reason for this departure. She also brings to attention the taking of minutes and production of the very transcripts that form the basis for this corpus. Next, the chair orients to the meeting agenda and its first item. All these acts constitute a typical opening sequence of a board meeting and lays the interactional foundation for the subsequent debate on issues and decision-making of the deliberations. In this particular instance, the opening sequence also requires the formal closing of a previous meeting, a request for the delegates' response to her *motion to close* the board meeting. This triggers a formulaic *response* from Mr. Fischer and *thanks* from the Chair.

#### 4.2.2 Initiating pre-scripted talk

Particular to the FOMC genre is the reading of pre-scripted material in the form of various reports and statements delivered by the delegates, forming a significant knowledge basis for the decision making of the FOMC.

[13] CHAIR YELLEN. And now, **let me call on Simon to deliver the Desk report.**

MR. POTTER. **Thank you, Madam Chair.** Over the intermeeting period, the 10-year Treasury yield increased 39 basis points, moving in tandem with a more pronounced 67 basis point rise in the 10-year German yield. The moves were concentrated in longer-dated forwards and occurred after German interest rates had reached historically low levels, as shown in the top-left panel of your first exhibit. ... (FOMC: 2015-06-17)

This comes in the form of an initiation-response sequence in which the chair introduces a person to deliver a statement. This is done by means of semi-formulaic statement as highlighted in [13], and the formula tends to include the phrasal verb *call (up)on* (other examples being *I (now/'d like to) call upon <name> to ...*). This request triggers a formulaic response, virtually always in the form of "Thank you Madam Chair / Mr. Chairman", followed by the requested statement.

#### 4.2.3 Current speaker selects next in pre-scripted talk

During informational, monographic sequences such as the one introduced in [13] above, it is not unusual for a non-chair speaker to select the next speaker without the intervention of the chair:

[14] MR. ROBERTS. ... If we take into account the severe recessions as well, the average drop in the federal funds rate would have been 400 basis points. Indeed, even in a mod-

erate recession, a funds rate cut of 275 basis points may be smaller than desirable. For example, in these scenarios, the EDO model's estimate of the equilibrium federal funds rate drops by 650 basis points. **Joe Gruber will continue our presentation.**

MR. GRUBER. **Thank you.** Compared with the turbulence in international financial markets that preceded your meeting in September, international conditions now appear considerably more stable. Foreign GDP growth is strengthening and financial markets remained relatively calm over much of the intermeeting period even as the probability of liftoff approached certainty. ... (FOMC: 2015-12-16)

Again, the speaker prefaces their part of the presentation with a thanking formula acknowledging that one has been given the floor, before continuing the jointly delivered pre-scripted talk.

#### 4.2.4 Next speaker self-selects

While the chair has unrestricted access to the technique of next speaker self-selects, it should be pointed out that the delegates also exercise this right to some extent, even in contexts outside of pre-scripted talk.

[15] MR. LACKER. I wasn't envisioning that we would change that. It's just that the primary dealers are this group, and then there's some special subset – we don't make all of our primary dealers do pro rata bids in the Treasury auction.

MS. McLAUGHLIN. Yes. We did actually discuss some of these ideas early in the review—for instance, could you have different tiers of membership? That might be possible in the future. We didn't feel that this was the right time to go there, **but I think it's something that we do want to –**

MR. LACKER. **Why?**

MS. McLAUGHLIN. **Well,** just because we don't feel yet that we need to branch out well beyond the broker-dealer and bank community that we already deal with. I think there's more scope first to bring more of those firms in.

MR. POTTER. We ran two pilots with smaller firms, and we looked at the performance of those smaller firms. Based on the performance, we would have to scale up with thousands of firms – the systems cost and the people cost is really high. I think Susan tried to make clear in the memo that we have to look at the marginal cost of adding counterparties versus the marginal benefit, and what we found is that these large market makers are really efficient for some of the things that we need to do. ... So we're learning. What I think is – and this goes to Governor Powell's question – there is a lot of change in the industry right now, and we just need to be flexible, which is why in 2017 we'll be revisiting some of these issues. And we're happy to give you more information on what we thought about the tiering as well.

MR. LACKER. **Okay.** You don't see an obvious impediment to that, other than maybe the Treasury's objection? (FOMC: 2015-06-17)

The segment shown is part of a longer sequence in which several speakers are debating an issue in a fairly spontaneous fashion. It contains a number of manifestations of the technique of next speaker self-selects. In a dyadic sequence between Ms. McLaughlin and Mr. Lacker, the latter speaker cuts off Ms. McLaughlin with the question *Why*. This is followed by a *Well*-prefaced response to that question. Next, Mr. Potter's statement adds to the response, thus creating a joint contribution between two speakers, and finally Mr. Lacker follows up with *Okay* and a further question. The segment thus gives testimony to the relatively spontaneous nature of parts of the FOMC deliberations. Given the dialogic nature seen from the transcription here, it becomes clear that speakers are not always awaiting the chair's approval to utter something in the flow of discussion (Asmuß/Svennevig 2009, Svennevig 2012).

#### 4.2.5 Closing and yielding floor back to chair

Delegates who hold the floor, for instance in a longer planned statement, have access to the technique of current speaker selects next and typically apply it at the end of a pre-scripted talk segment:

[16] MR. POTTER. ... Both of these numbers represent a modest increase from median expectations in the July surveys and continue to reflect a wide range of expectations. **Thank you, Madam Chair. That concludes our prepared remarks.**

CHAIR YELLEN. **Thank you very much.** The floor is open for questions. Jim.

MR. BULLARD. Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm looking at exhibit 2, figure 7 ... (FOMC: 2015-09-17)

As suggested in section 4.1, in shifts from pre-scripted talk and back to discussion, a speaker regularly evokes the chair with a vocative expression.

#### 4.2.6 Current speaker selects next in q/a sequence

Another context in which a non-chair speaker selects the next speaker is as part of question/answer sequences.

[17] MR. DUDLEY. **I have a question for President Williams.** Let's say the risk was all Treasury yields. Then don't you have the risk of Treasury yields going up a lot?

MR. WILLIAMS. **Yes. That's one way to put it.**

VICE CHAIRMAN DUDLEY. It seems to me that it doesn't matter that much if the cap rates are out of line or the Treasury yields are out of line. Something is out of line; you still have the same risks.

MR. WILLIAMS. Right. That's actually how I was thinking about it. (FOMC: 2015-10-28)

As in [15] above, this dyadic interaction occurs in a sequence where the chair has temporarily relinquished the right to steer the turn allocation and allows the participants freely to take the floor without explicitly requesting approval from the chair. Such dyadic interaction sequences

seem to have a central function in providing knowledge and clarifying information, for instance as a follow-up to longer presentations as in 4.2.2 to 4.2.3.

#### 4.2.7 *Vote-taking*

A specific form of discourse constituent of the meeting genre is vote-taking, as also seen in some of the procedural phrases covered in section 4.1.3.

[18] CHAIRMAN BERNANKE. Other comments? **I'll ask for a show of hands. All in favor? Opposed? Thank you.** We have an issue related to FOIA. A memorandum was distributed proposing to delegate certain FOIA responsibilities as described in the May 1 note to the Committee from Scott Alvarez and Kit Wheatley. Scott is here, I assume? Yes, there he is. Are there any questions for Scott? These are just technical changes. **Do I have a motion?**

MS. BIES. **So moved.**

CHAIRMAN BERNANKE. **So moved. Thank you. Any objection? All right.** (FOMC: 2006-05-10)

In dealing with a particular agenda item, this is an essential part of the discussion, in which final decisions are made and recorded. The chair is endowed with rights to conduct this part of the exchange at a point where they see fit, i. e. when the discussion has been exhausted or when the time restriction necessitates its termination (Asmuß/Svennevig 2009). It is clear from the excerpt that the turn-taking is in the form of the chair asking formulaic questions and the delegates responding non-verbally. A set of procedural phrases trigger an affirmative or negative vote from the delegates and the confirmatory *So moved*. The actual vote is placed by means of raising of hands, an act which is inferable from the transcription (at Bernanke's *Thank you*) though not visually represented in it.

#### 4.2.8 *Transition to new agenda item*

Transition from an agenda item to the next is among the key tasks of the chair. Although this function is not directly linked to turn-taking, it is often the case that the chair's mere announcement of the next item triggers an immediate response from a delegate:

[19] CHAIRMAN BERNANKE. ... Thank you very much. Okay. **Our next item on the agenda** is the economic situation.

MR. STOCKTON. **Thank you, Mr. Chairman.** I am told that counselors are taught to begin by acknowledging the validity of the fears and anxieties of those whom they are counseling. The strategy then is to deconstruct and examine ... (FOMC: 2006-05-10)

It is clear from the example that a particular speaker, Mr. Stockton in this case, has been pre-assigned with a task to introduce the topic to be discussed, and an explicit vocative instructing him to do so is not needed. In all likelihood, the turn-taking is mediated through visual signals not available to us as users of the corpus.

#### 4.2.9 Closing of meeting

Finally, the closing turn of an FOMCD is also among the tasks that are pre-allocated to the chair:

[20] CHAIR YELLEN. I should say that, as you know, this is not the first time we've had a conversation like this around the table, and it has always come to a similar fate.

MR. WILLIAMS. Nonetheless, we will try again.

CHAIR YELLEN. Okay. Thank you very much.

MR. FISCHER. Thank you, Madam Chair.

CHAIR YELLEN. **The meeting is now adjourned**, and the Board meeting is ended. We will next meet Tuesday and Wednesday, March 15 and 16. Lunch is served. And for those of you who can stay, Linda Robertson is prepared to give a legislative update.

END OF MEETING (FOMC: 2016-01-27)

This central task terminates the decision-making procedure and relies on a set of formulaic patterns associated with this function, all of which revolve around the word *adjourned* (see also section 4.1.3).

### 5 Discussion and conclusion

The sections above have accounted for the ways in which turn-taking is regulated and performed in deliberations of monetary policy by the FOMC. In this section we highlight the most important take-aways from the analysis, relating them to other forms of specialised discourse and pointing out limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Taking as a starting point the assumption that turn-taking in specialised spoken discourse is the product of systematic transformations of ordinary conversation (Sacks et al. 1974; see section 2), we have observed some clear patterns as to the specific features of FOMC discourse. We have seen that speakers in this genre utilise a set of compositional and formulaic phraseological items that contribute significantly to the management of turn allocation in the deliberations. As can be expected in a chaired meeting, *vocatives* are the main instrument by which the chair allocates turns to delegates, but they are also used by delegates to signal talk directed at another participant. It would be of interest in future research to explore further the variability of chosen vocative forms to see, for instance, if the use of first names versus title and surname is constrained in systematic ways reflecting differences in power status or other interpersonal relations. *Thanking* serves a particular and clearly genre-specific discourse function of acknowledging that one has been granted the right to speak and initiating a turn, and it is regularly accompanied by a vocative invoking the chair. Jointly these observations illustrate the relative formality and the characteristically polite nature of this discourse genre (RQ1; see section 2). Furthermore, a set of genre-specific *formulaic expressions* are associated with regular meeting functions such as opening the meeting, transition to new agenda item, vote-taking and closing of meetings. Several of these overlap with what can be found in chaired meetings generally (e. g. Asmuß/Svennevig 2009, Ford 2008, Svennevig 2012), e. g. opening by a greeting or pre-closing expressions such as (*Any*) *other questions*. Others are specific to the

subgenre of a formally regulated meeting. These include more or less *codified formulaic expressions* with turn-regulating functions, most notably *I now call upon X to do Y, Z will continue our presentation* and *That concludes our prepared remarks* (RQ3). Of these, a relatively minor subset is drawn from the formal code for decision-making as expressed in the procedural rules for chaired meetings (Robert et al. 2020; see section 4.1), most notably *second* and *so moved*. These observations reveal that much of the interaction and turn-taking is steered through the use of formulaic expressions and, again, gives evidence of the relative formality of these deliberations. We therefore conclude that FOMC discourse belongs at the fixed end of continuum of regulation of next-turn allocation and is thus markedly distinct from ordinary conversation, as expected (RQ1).

Turn-transitions tend to co-occur with acts pertaining to the interactional setting, such as expressing agreement, soliciting co-participation or votes from delegates, etc. Particular types of speech acts are pre-allocated to speakers with specific institutional identities in the way one would expect in a formalised meeting session. Most notably, the chair has a particular role in steering the distribution of turns by selecting next speaker in debates, before longer statements and in vote-taking, and ensuring topical progression by announcing the transition to a new agenda item. However, the FOMC corpus also gives testimony of the delegates' role in selecting next speaker or self-selecting (sections 4.2.3 to 4.2.6) and their more general rights to question, put forth motions, second motions, etc. (RQ2). The FOMC meetings contain stretches of dialogue that are highly dynamic and bear resemblance of ordinary conversation, with interruptions, cut-off sentences and response markers such as *okay* (see e. g. section 4.2.4), but also segments that are monologic and involve the reading of pre-scripted text and therefore longer turns and few interruptions, if any (4.2.2). This variability distinguishes the genre from certain other specialised contexts, such as interviews and courtroom hearings (see Anesa 2009, Angouri/Marra 2010, Atkinson/Drew 1979, Bargiela-Chiappini/Harris 1997, Greatbach 1988) (RQ1).

In these other genres there is seldom any deviation from the turn-type pre-allocation system whereby the right to ask questions and select next speaker is held by one party only (interviewer or judge, respectively). In FOMCD the right to self-selection is open to all delegates in sequences where the chair has 'opted out' by temporarily relinquishing the right to steer the turn-taking, and it can thus be concluded that the turn-taking system in this genre is not entirely strictly regulated. This might well be a general feature of expert-to-expert communication, a question that could be pursued in future research from other domains. Nevertheless, it is undeniably the case that the turn-taking system manifests the relative power of chair (RQ2). The control of the agenda, steering of the debate, termination of a discussion and adjournment of the meeting are all interactionally significant elements that can be seen as enactments of this empowered role. We have considered this for the corpus as a whole, but future research should aim at investigating whether there are discernible differences in the management styles observable from the transcriptions of the three different chairs represented in the corpus across its history (Greenspan, Bernanke and Yellen). There is also a more general potential for studying how monetary policy is achieved in practice through the corpus by exploring more content-based aspects than we have chosen to focus on here. Therefore, future research should be aimed at studying more content-related aspects of how this highly influential institution produces and reproduces itself (Boden 1994; see section 2) through the decision-making procedure, for instance how issues are laid out logically and argumentatively, how knowledge is presented, and so on.



The inductive, data-driven method seems efficient for the exploratory and large-scale charting of the turn-taking dynamics that we have undertaken here. The tools of the Sketch Engine are flexible and effective to this end. We acknowledge, however, that this approach has limitations, most notably the fact that we rely solely on transcripts of speech and not audio or video recordings. This has the consequence that non-verbal and visual cues, prosodic and gestural features, nodding and eye contact, cannot be studied. Despite this, we would emphasise that a range of pragmatic and interactional features of the corpus can indeed be studied. The aggregated data in Tables 1–3 showed, for instance, the repetitive occurrence of response markers such as *okay, yes, right, all right* and discourse markers such as *sure, I see, (I'm) sorry, is that right, etc.*, and future studies should be aimed at investigating the conditions under which these occur and how it compares with ordinary conversation. This initial study has been limited in scope and there are many other features to explore from the corpus. These include – but are certainly not restricted to – interruptions (to what extent do they occur/are they associated with particular speakers/roles/genders), first-name usage in vocatives (by whom and towards whom), hedging and repairs, and the role that humour, narration and other rhetorical devices play in FOMC discourse.

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