Introduction

*Annalisa Zanola, Roxanne Barbara Doerr, John Casey Gooch**

1. Oral effectiveness and efficiency in English: past, present and future perspectives

This special issue of *Textus* contains a collection of papers covering a wide range of contexts in which oral communication can take place, focusing on different domains, participants and levels of specialisation and dealing with issues ranging from segmental to suprasegmental phonetics and phonology, from variation in spoken language to the interface between phonology, morphology and syntax, as well as all its teaching issues. The development and state of the art of theoretical and applied research in the field may be found in the eleven texts published here. Thus, a constant exchange between theory and practice is the common thread running through the whole volume.

All the papers start from the assumption that oral communication does not consist in the mere transfer of – or talking about – information and data, but rather involves a necessarily complex set of cognitive and pragmatic acts which may be positioned along a message-bearing continuum, linking oral production to the interpretation of the message, and its encoding to its decoding. To disseminate any message in any language, including one bearing specialised contents, the speaker needs to construct it linguistically in such a

Paragraph 1 "Oral effectiveness and efficiency in English: past, present and future perspectives" was written by Annalisa Zanola, paragraph 2 "The impact of oral communication across the centuries: the legacy of rhetorical studies" by John C. Gooch, and part 3 "A multidimensional approach to oral communication research" by Roxanne B. Doerr.

Textus 1-2022, pp. 7-16
ISSN 1824-3967

way as to ensure its propagation, acceptance and entrenchment in the target discourse community.

Moving to the specificity of the English language, communicating in English is so widely practised in international scientific and academic communities worldwide that this language is taken for granted in any national or local context where the first language is not necessarily English. Moreover, this common practice is typified by its very wide variety of users and receivers: both native and non-native speakers with diverse levels of competence in English are required to pursue clear and comprehensible communication in English in their professional or study context of choice when addressing native and non-native speakers of English who are strongly motivated to absorb and assimilate old and new contents in an immediate, effective and efficient way (Pinnavaia and Zanola 2022; Terrier 2021). Oral English is increasingly used as a *koiné* for study, research and professional purposes, and as an increasingly standardised lingua franca that is mostly spoken as a second language though being the first language of a limited percentage of speakers (Siegel 1985: 359). Nevertheless, as Hymes (1971) had already anticipated, English is not just any *koiné*, as this would entail it to stabilise and become a primary language. On the contrary, the development of English should be approached within the context of its expansion in contents and roles and resulting mixture of different varieties.

The problem of the effectiveness of oral communication in (academic and non-academic) technical-scientific contexts requires a preliminary statement of 'clarity, understandability and effectiveness' as regards the speakers and listeners we will define as *English as an International Language users*, thus extending the target audience of many of today's international scientific, technical and/or academic English oral texts. To this end, there is an urgent need to take a snapshot of the main difficulties that a (native or non-English speaking) speaker or listener may encounter in approaching international oral scientific contexts (lectures, conferences, debates, dialogues, instructions, explanations and meetings in academic or professional contexts in general). The renowned weakness of the oral English training apparatus in multiple international professional settings is often reported by those who, even after years of uninterrupted study of the language, report lack of success in

their performances and the missed attainment or implementation of fixed goals.

Interestingly, studies on the English language seem to demonstrate that the issue is by no means a new one. As far as the study of oral performance is concerned, examples of such inquiries are scattered throughout the centuries: some 16th century English treatises on punctuation (Hart 1569; Puttenham 1589) made the first steps towards the definition of a written 'transcription' of an oral text; in the 17th century, the study of English intonation and rhythm was refined, with the specific aim of demonstrating the 'Excellency' of the English language (Butler 1634); the 18th and 19th centuries saw the flourishing of studies on oral 'delivery' all over Europe, because speaking opportunities were rapidly developing in Parliament, at the bar, in the pulpit, in the theatre and in polite conversation, leading to an increase in the demand for appropriately expressing ideas in oral English.

Centuries have passed, but no fixed rule about the proper use of voice, gesture, register, lexical choices, and style in oral performances has been codified. And yet, since the 16th century (Hart 1569) the concept that the listener's *eie and eare* (sight and hearing) should be harmoniously involved through the speaker's melody of voice and gesture has been clearly expounded. The parts of a speech ought to be combined into a suitable and attractive arrangement that follows unspoken rules on expected patterns of the audience. Without such harmony, the entire effectiveness and efficiency of oral communication may fail.

This collection of papers is, in fact, centred on the closely interwoven themes of the past, the present and the future of oral effectiveness and efficiency, which are intrinsic to oral communication in English. The approach to this field of research is a multi-faceted and ubiquitous process, which is reflected in the plurality of perspectives adopted and the variety of discursive domains investigated by the authors of the papers featured in this volume.

2. The impact of oral communication across the centuries: the legacy of rhetorical studies

The discipline of rhetoric also has much to say about the effectiveness of oral communication in technical-scientific

contexts. The rhetorical tradition, since the days of the ancient Greeks and Romans, has pondered how oral communication (oratory, specifically) has moved audiences to action. Notably, Aristotle opened his *Treatise on Rhetoric* by challenging the notion of rhetoric and dialectic as separate intellectual endeavours. He argued that the two were, more or less, two sides of the same coin. Whereas the syllogism (i.e. major premise, minor premise, conclusion) represented the primary feature of dialectic, the enthymeme, or a syllogism in which the audience must supply the missing premise, was the essence of persuasion – of rhetoric. Furthermore, he categorised three types of oral rhetoric in human societies as *deliberative*, *forensic*, and *epideictic*. Deliberative rhetoric, as Aristotle explained, was characterised by future action; a parliamentary body, for example, in debating a new law or policy was engaging in deliberative rhetoric. Forensic rhetoric, however, focused on the past by reconstructing past events. Aristotle described the oral communication of a courtroom as this type of rhetoric. Last, epideictic rhetoric referred to speeches that praised or blamed; many contemporary teachers of rhetoric often use the eulogy at a funeral to illustrate what Aristotle meant.

The Romans, too, contributed to the corpus on rhetoric. The Roman lawyer and politician Cicero, for example, outlined the five "canons of rhetoric" in his *De Oratore*. *Inventio*, or rhetorical invention, referred to the creation of the idea or ideas for the speech while *dispositio*, or arrangement, described the structure of the oration. *Elocutio*, or style, was his term for explaining the orator's use of language and his word choice; closely related to elocutio was *pronuntiato*, or delivery, which captured the non-verbal aspects of speechmaking, such as eye contact with audience and body movements or gestures. Finally, *memoria*, or memory, was defined as speakers' methods for memorising long orations. Often, they would use pneumonic devices for remembering oratories, oratories that could sometimes last hours.

By the late Medieval period, though, western scholasticism had begun separating the invention, arrangement, and memory elements from rhetoric while classifying rhetoric as only style and delivery. This mindset persisted into the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods in western history, with scholastics of this period labelling rhetoric as 'ornamentation' and that invention and arrangement

fell under the category of 'logic,' not rhetoric. Similar perspectives governed the teaching and philosophy of rhetoric through the 19th century and into the first half of the 20th.

The mid to late 20th century saw what rhetorical scholars have termed a 'resurgence' or 'rebirth' of rhetoric. In the years following World War Two, American and European theorists (e.g., Kenneth Burke, Lloyd Bitzer, Chaim Perelman) began positing theories that, indirectly or directly, challenged the notion of rhetoric as simply style and delivery (Lane, Abigail, Gooch 2014). Burke's pentad, which he first articulated in *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), became a widely used teaching tool in American schools with its emphasis on act, agency, agent, scene, and purpose as lens for examining any human communication. In addition, Polish-born philosopher Chaim Perelman and his colleague, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, published *The New Rhetoric*: *A Treatise on Argumentation* (1966), a work that helped shift dominant paradigms governing the philosophy and teaching of rhetoric in the western tradition. And Lloyd Bitzer's 1968 essay "The Rhetorical Situation" asked his readership to consider rhetoric in relation to audience, exigence, and constraints thereby encouraging them to consider the contexts of communication acts.

It was during this resurgence of rhetoric in the 20th century that scholars began seeing rhetoric as part of any intellectual enterprise that made use of symbols. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962, inspired scholars from several academic disciplines with its emphasis on the role of language and discourse in causing shifts in scientific paradigms. Rhetoricians, like others, were motivated by this ground-breaking work. Alan Gross, for instance, in his *The Rhetoric of Science* (1990) argued that scientific and technical disciplines were engaging in persuasion. In the U.S., the 1980s and 1990s saw Gross and other rhetoric scholars begin challenging the Enlightenment idea of a "window-pane" view of language (i.e. positivistic view of language), a view science had embraced and one that held that language acted as a transmitter of truth and reality. Rather, as Gross and others argued, scientists construct truth and reality by engaging in persuasion by convincing other members of the scientific community to accept the validity and truth of an experiment, a conclusion, a newly held belief, and so on. One could claim, as they contended, that the Ciceronian canons were at work in scientific oral presentations just as those canons

were at work in the speech of an American president or a British prime minister.

Although rhetorical scholars disagree as to the degree to which rhetoric functions in science, most would concur that 'symbolic choice' plays a major role in the effectiveness of technical or scientific expert's proficiency in oral communication. David Zarefsky, American academic and rhetorician, defines "symbolic choice" as a speaker "choosing among available symbols to characterize a situation" as well as influencing others' choices of symbols (1986). The papers in this special edition, in addressing a range of past, present, and future communication contexts, also reflect past, present, and future rhetorical contexts that include speaker, subject, audience, and occasion. Within these rhetorical contexts, speakers make symbolic choices in relation to their subjects and their audiences while also being mindful of the occasion in which oral communication takes place. Considering symbolic choices made in relation to rhetorical contexts can help English-language scholars address the problem of effectiveness of oral communication in the technical-scientific realm.

3. A multidimensional approach to oral communication research

Throughout the centuries, oral communication has represented the most immediate and spontaneous channel of human knowledge transmission and undergone many phases and forms of improvement. As a reflection of its complexity and heterogeneity (Quasthoff 1995), the papers in this special issue present multifaceted fields of inquiry and considerations on the development of oral English(es) in time, context, and media on various (socio)linguistic and pragmatic levels while maintaining key aspects throughout their succession. In fact, although the papers may be read and attributed to four macro areas (diachronic dimension, synchronic dimension, applicative dimension and future prospects), it is noteworthy to point out that the 'voice' and even the main dichotomies of oral English(es) is essentially reiterated throughout their succession. This is even more important when considering that oral communication, albeit the first and most spontaneous channel of communication known to mankind, is the hardest to grasp and convert into tangible forms to be analysed and studied, which makes the present collection of

English language studies all the more relevant. To better appreciate such shared ideas, it would be best to touch upon the uniqueness of each contribution within its respective macro area and then unpack the collective 'lessons learned' that could best guide future inquiry into oral communication in English and its varieties.

The first three papers are concerned with the diachronic dimension, and therefore focus on the centuries in which oral English was initially assessed, codified and introduced to the general public through transversal teaching or the work of certain professionals. Zanola's contribution opens this strictly diachronic section by providing a historical excursus into the development of key terms such as delivery, eloquence, elocution and pronunciation from classical oratory and rhetorics to the current age. This is followed by Vicentini's focus on a specific period, i.e. that predating the 1760 elocutionary movement, and the role of contemporaneous manuals in drawing attention to and grasping the importance of proper oral communication. This contribution also sets the stage for Sturiale's paper, which presents a study on actors and their seemingly indirect but effective and entertaining education in what was considered correct pronunciation in a time in which speaking and social standing were closely bound.

The inquiry into contemporary diachronic and synchronic use of specialised oral communication genres leading to the second macro area on the synchronic dimension is at the heart of Crawford's paper. It investigates the development of strategies adopted in an oral financial genre, i.e. videocast strategy presentations in comparison with audio earning conference calls, which recalls the historical relationship between economics and oral communication as forms of currency that create transactions and exchange of value. Such a sense of dynamic exchange is found in the next two papers, which deal with another, extremely relevant research field of oral communication, i.e. teaching (Brown and Yule 1983). In fact, the next paper by Doerr introduces military English courses for foreigners and their innovative teaching materials and STANAG 6001 assessment methods which focus more on oral (listening and speaking) skills rather than their traditional ELT counterparts. However, teaching materials must be integrated with training for teachers in what Nicaise terms "teacher talk" in his paper. In doing so, their spoken language will not only transmit content, but also

have the potential of encouraging real communication and better language acquisition.

These state-of-the-art considerations on contemporary forms and developments of oral communication find their concrete counterparts in the three papers of the third macro area concerning the applicative dimension. Indeed, the previously mentioned values of teaching and knowledge transmission and dissemination are also present in Anderson and Cirillo's paper, where oral English is set in an academic and international context and denotes identificatory membership and altercasting within a highly interactive genre. Interaction is also the starting point for Suzuki's contribution, as it presents an in-depth inquiry into how different cultures instinctively use oral adverbial epistemic markers to not only communicate and transmit a message, but also to convey appropriateness and demonstrate pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge and competence. Such skills are also found in Vignozzi's study of a highly persuasive emerging videoaudial genre that is embedded in law firm websites, i.e. attorney FAQs, and their oral use of personal preforms to transmit emotion and engage their prospective clients.

With this idea of convincing and conveying an authentic identity through oral communication, the fourth and final macro area of the special issue concerning future prospects of research opens with Bruti and Ranzato's paper on dialect coaches and their search to best embrace the English language's oral heterogeneity through a combination of shared professional praxis and individual idiosyncratic approaches. The volume closes with a contribution by Vasta that highlights the necessity of teaching and understanding oral communication's metadiscursive and multimodal implementations by means of the innovative genre of video podcasts, which has been extensively appreciated in the wake of the ongoing Covid pandemic. By doing so, it brings the main ideas of the special issue full circle by enriching oral products with emotional but limited visuals and using video podcasts to create rapport with clients and stakeholders and to train future professionals in an ever-changing professional and interactive worldwide scenario.

The papers in the volume may therefore be perceived as unique glimpses into the increasingly acknowledged field of oral communication in English(es) that is constantly growing in

terms of materials, media, skills, professions, and approaches and encompasses both research and practice. The collection first confirms the complexity of oral communication, which is reflected in the multifarious and intersecting linguistic levels and disciplines that have come together to investigate it: terminology, sociolinguistics, sociopragmatics, accent and language acquisition, rhetorics, textbook evaluation and multimodality/digital studies, among others.

The necessity of delving into such complexity lies in oral English's variety, the recognition of which represents both a means of achieving authenticity of values and identities and that of the prescriptive pursuit of homogeneity and standardisation. Oral communication is an important element of identity construction and thus unites or divides categories and strengthens interaction, involvement and emotion in order to grant persuasive power to those who know how to use it best. This is connected to another pivotal concept of the volume, i.e. the presence of international and/or professional communities and their use of oral English to learn, transmit, and disseminate, as well as improve practice, both between experts and novices and among experts from different countries and fields of research. The role in oral communication in this sense has not been substituted or undermined – on the contrary, it has been enhanced – by the arrival and implementation of digital media and tools. More in general though, the papers have demonstrated in many instances how important it is to improve learning materials (e.g. manuals, grammars, textbooks) focused on oral communication skills, in order to promote progress in traditional and emerging professions and methods of self- and knowledge expression (e.g., presentations, teaching, transmission of online content). Oral communication thus represents a means to emancipate oneself through the acquisition of knowledge but also the manner of communicating it (skills, language and accent) and the professional and personal identity that is thus forged.

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