Introduction: Discourse and responsibility

Anna Solin and Jan-Ola Östman

This special issue of JALPP focuses on responsibility in professional settings and in particular on how responsibility is manifested, expressed, attributed, negotiated and contested in the discourses of professional settings. The studies in this collection thereby also show the importance of analysing discourse from the point of view of discourse participants’ agency, accountability and responsibility, and they thus add an important dimension to existing strands of research in discourse studies and applied linguistics.

In discussions of organisational and workplace cultures, the notion of responsibility is typically framed as concerned with professional ethics. Responsibility is analysed in terms of the different accountabilities that professional practitioners are purported to have in relation to their clients, audiences, funders and other stakeholders. So far, there has been little academic research combining such a perspective with a close analysis of language use. This is so despite the fact that discourse on or related to professional responsibility has proliferated in recent years both in public fora (e.g. in connection with corporate social responsibility reports) and in more local practices (e.g. as manifested in the publication of in-house codes of conduct). While there is much research on professional discourse and language use in the workplace, studies rarely address the theme of responsibility explicitly and directly.

The studies in this special issue of JALPP examine different types of contexts where the production of texts and/or interaction is definitional of professional
practice: health care, social work and journalism. The types of data studied range from globally available mass-consumed discourse (such as news agency dispatches) to local face-to-face encounters (e.g. counselling sessions). The data come from a variety of linguistic and cultural settings: the UK, Norway, the USA and Finland.

The articles all stress the dynamic nature of responsibility. The discourse perspective adopted reinforces the view that responsibility relations need to be perceived as fluid, negotiated and construed in interaction, rather than as predetermined.

The notion of responsibility
Responsibility is a central concept in many academic disciplines, including philosophy, political science, law and psychology. Unlike terms such as ‘accountability’ and ‘ethics’, it is also frequent in everyday usage. We position ourselves in relation to our sense of responsibility to others and in relation to (different voices in) discourses about responsibility. Still, the concept of responsibility has not been prominent in discourse studies so far.

The term responsibility is often used, even by scholars, as a ‘term of art’, presupposed to be generally understood. The complexity of the term is at least partly due to the multiple and even opposing meanings that it has. The adjective responsible can refer both to someone who is to blame (‘He was responsible for the accident’) and to someone who is trustworthy (‘He is a responsible parent’). The noun responsibility can also be used to refer to the duties attached to a particular position (‘the responsibilities of a minister’). Indeed, Harmon (1995: 5) goes as far as to claim that since the idea of responsibility connotes ‘multiple and conflicting meanings’, the term is ‘inherently paradoxical’.

In order for responsibility to work as an analytic term, it is necessary to make a distinction between primarily moral and primarily legal meanings (cf. Harmon 1995; Cane 2002). The meaning invoking moral judgments emphasises the way in which human behaviour is constrained by moral rules. Such rules ‘mark out the things that are wrong for anyone’ (Baier 1970: 104), in contrast to responsibilities attached to a social role or position. Examples of this first kind of usage are collocations like responsible consumer and responsible citizen.

The second meaning emphasises legal responsibility, for example a person’s accountability to others because he or she has contracted particular duties or responsibilities. Here the person or collective is in charge of something, and may be prosecuted in cases of neglect. This meaning is the more salient in the following example:

Exxon still refuses to accept responsibility for allowing a captain it knew to be a lapsed alcoholic to take control of the ship in such dangerous and environmentally sensitive waters. (Independent, February 28, 2008)
While the distinction between moral and legal responsibility is by no means clear-cut (causing an oil spill certainly has both legal and moral implications), these two aspects of the concept of responsibility are often good to keep apart for analytic purposes.

Another important distinction is that between individual/personal responsibility and collective responsibility. Jonas (1984) notes that in a traditional conception of ethics, responsibility had to do mainly with relations between individuals: the individual was perceived as having responsibilities to his/her fellow humans. Responsible behaviour could be demanded from individuals who had the requisite agency and knowledge to act responsibly and who could be understood to act intentionally and out of free will.

However, ethical discussions have in recent decades broadened in scope: in the case of collective harms such as oil spills and corporate fraud it may be difficult if not impossible to point to single individuals who can be held accountable. We can thus also conceive of collectives such as organisations and corporations as responsible moral agents, i.e. as responsible in the sphere where evaluations of responsibility are made. In many cases, responsibility has been institutionalised, for example in the form of codes of conduct and ethics handbooks. The ‘ethical universe’ has enlarged in other ways, too. As Thompson (1995: 262) points out, much communication is no longer face-to-face but is mediated across great distances of time and space. This has important implications for how relations of responsibility are analysed: we may be analysing relations which are not between single individuals situated in the same temporal and spatial context, but for instance between a multinational media corporation and its global audience.

Analysing responsibility in discourse

In the articles in this special issue, the discourse perspective is evident in the way responsibility is conceptualised as both constructed and dynamic. Responsible selves, identities and relations are not perceived as predetermined and stable, but as construed and negotiated in discourse, in interactions and texts; responsibility can be taken on, denied, assigned to other participants and evaded.

A central concern in all the articles is the way responsibility relations are construed in a given professional setting. The articles emphasise that responsibility is not a stable quality of individuals or organisations, but is negotiated in texts and interactions. Therefore, the analysis of responsibility requires attention to the details of language use as well as close contextualisation of the data. The analyses examine, in particular, negotiations over roles, rights and obligations related to professional, institutional and personal responsibility.
The aim of this special issue is not first and foremost to provide generalisations about what constitutes responsibility or responsibility talk, but to illustrate how responsibility is (often implicitly) enacted in discourse. The articles analyse specific settings, whether caregiving or counselling or news reporting, and show how context constrains and frames the way responsibility can be attributed to different participants. Given the particularity of each context being analysed, the authors use different concepts and analytic tools to tackle the constructed nature of responsibility.

The special issue starts off with a theoretically oriented article by Srikant Sarangi, who takes a role-relational perspective on responsibility. In his discussion of the rights, roles and responsibilities of participants in discourse, Sarangi stresses in particular the importance of the changing and emerging roles that interactants have and take on in interaction. His empirical data come from healthcare encounters where responsibility issues are particularly salient: discussions between counsellors and parents about whether a child should be genetically tested. Sarangi distinguishes between moral and causal responsibility and examines how these two types of responsibility are negotiated in the interaction between parents, counsellors and medical specialists. In a role-relational perspective interactants are seen as evaluating their responsibilities in terms of the (sometimes conflicting) roles they have; thus, a parent may talk in the varying (and often overlapping) roles of mother, wife and reproductively active woman.

The importance of the roles that participants take on or are assigned in discourse, and how roles and relations get entangled with the very concept of responsibility, is a theme that also emerges as central in many of the other contributions in this special issue.

Two of the articles focus on how responsibility is assigned and negotiated in social work settings. Outi Jolanki analyses the distribution of responsibility between different actors in the care of elderly people in Finland. Her data consist of interviews where family members of care recipients discuss the roles and responsibilities of professional care workers vis-à-vis the responsibilities of family members. This is a highly contested area, involving evaluations of both moral and legal responsibility: who has the responsibility to care for the elderly in welfare societies? In the interview talk, professional caregivers are attributed a variety of different roles, ranging from allies and co-workers to adversaries. The analysis focuses on how interviewees construct these positions and relations, what kind of conduct is linked to the different positions and what kinds of meanings are given to the notion of responsibility.

In her study on caseworker–client interaction Maureen Matarese focuses on the way a social worker constructs client responsibilities in interactions with four homeless clients in a New York City shelter. Here the focus is on how
the social worker manages the tension between institutional demands (particularly regarding the length that clients are allowed to stay in shelter) and individual clients’ varying needs. Through an analysis of the discursive choices of the social worker (e.g. deontic modals, personal pronouns and expressions of time and space), Matarese shows that the way the social worker construes responsibility relations in her talk is highly dependent on the institutional setting and the various policy constraints affecting her position. Of particular significance is the way in which the social worker displaces responsibility to the institution in order to make it possible for herself to align with the client.

In the fourth study, Gøril Thomassen, Srikant Sarangi and John-Arne Skolbekken concentrate on the framing of parental responsibility in genetic counselling sessions. The assumption is that parents routinely assume responsibility for the health of their children and that this responsibility is particularly salient in a context where possible inheritance of a genetic disorder is being discussed. The authors analyse counselling sessions held at a Norwegian hospital, and focus, in particular, on how responsibility talk is framed by parents and how genetic counsellors respond to such talk. The study shows that while parents often express parental responsibility by emphasising potential risks to their children, counsellors may not necessarily align with such concerns but redirect the focus to the risks affecting the parents themselves. Counsellors also typically aim to retain a non-directive stance, expressing generic and tentative claims rather than attempting to explicitly influence the client’s decision-making.

The remaining three articles in this special issue examine how responsibility is assigned and represented in media settings, both in well-established genres like the news report and in journalists’ talk about professional responsibility. Anna Solin examines constructions of responsibility in the journalistic profession, which has been the focus and forum of extensive ethical debates concerning such widely held ideals as objectivity and fairness. Solin’s article examines how British environmental journalists describe their professional ideals with reference to reporting on environmental risks. Ideals such as accuracy and autonomy are construed as central to journalism, but also as being constantly at risk due to editorial pressure and competition within and between newsrooms. The practice of risk reporting is thus constructed as a conflictual one: responsibilities to sources, audiences and editors do not necessarily coincide.

Maija Stenvall examines news agency texts from the point of view of the attribution of claims. She focuses on how responsibility for claims can be avoided by obscuring the sources of such claims. Much of the contents of news dispatches consist of reported speech and it is essential for the reader to gain a sense of who is responsible for particular claims: the journalist or some news actor. Stenvall provides several examples from news agency reports of how responsibility is negotiated between journalists and their sources. Attributions which risk
blurring responsibility for claims range from the use of general terms such as Iraq (as in ‘Iraq says...’) to the use of unnamed sources.

Finally, Karin Tusting examines the construction of social responsibility in a British Catholic weekly newspaper. In particular, she analyses who is construed as having responsibility for social problems. In Tusting’s study, responsibility is closely tied to the notion of agency: the analysis looks at who are given the role of agent (i.e. the capacity to act on social problems) and who are given voice (i.e. the capacity to speak out and express opinions on social problems). The study shows that responsibility in this particular newspaper tends to be assigned mainly to institutions and powerful individuals, but seldom to ordinary people. Tusting relates this to the tendency in high modernity for decision-making to be increasingly passed over to ‘expert systems’: the ordinary person remains in the role of spectator, with little agency and little responsibility.

This collection of studies stakes out the different dimensions in the study of responsibility from a discourse-studies and applied-linguistics point of view. Many of the issues dealt with here are further explored in the chapters of Östman and Solin (2015), stressing the necessity of taking an interdisciplinary view on responsibility in discourse.

Notes

1. See, for example, Linell and Sarangi (1998), Sarangi and Roberts (1999) and Iedema and Wodak (1999).

2. A notable exception is Atkinson (1999). Overall, there is a relatively limited amount of research in discourse studies focusing on responsibility. A key volume is Hill and Irvine (1993); other fairly recent studies include Sneijder and te Molder (2005), Brown and Rubin (2005), Johnson (2008), Kampf (2009) and Rasmussen (2013).

3. The Exxon oil spill is a notorious example of how complex responsibility attribution can get. The oil tanker Exxon Valdez spilled 11 million gallons of crude oil in Prince William Sound, Alaska, in March 1989. The argument over compensation for fishermen and native Alaskans was only resolved some 20 years after the event.

About the authors

Anna Solin works as Senior Lecturer at the Department of Modern Languages, University of Helsinki, Finland. She gained her PhD in Linguistics at Lancaster University, UK, in 2001. She currently directs a research project on language regulation in academia, with a particular focus on the shifting norms of English in different genres and settings. Address for correspondence: Department of Modern
Languages, PO Box 24, FIN-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: anna.solin@helsinki.fi

Jan-Ola Östman is Professor of Scandinavian Languages at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and President of the International Pragmatics Association. He has a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley, USA, and he has previously worked as Professor of English and Professor of General Linguistics at the University of Helsinki. His research focuses on pragmatics, discourse and the media; constructional approaches to language; minority languages and dialectology; and language policy and the sociology of language. Address of correspondence: Department of Finnish, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian, PO Box 24, FIN-00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: jan-ola.ostman@helsinki.fi

References


