DISCOURSE AND THE FRAMING OF RISK

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN THE DEPARTMENT OF LINGUISTICS MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY-SYDNEY

30TH JULY, 2011

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Discourse and the Framing of Risk

Abstract

This thesis applies frame analysis (Goffman, 1974; Gumperz, 1982) to the understanding of how risk situations are framed through discourse. It focuses on four professional research sites predominately concerned with risk communication. The thesis develops an understanding of contextualist (social-cultural) theories of risk and pairs this with discourse – interactional approaches to explore how situations of risk are framed though the written accounts of institutional members. Frame analysis is further developed as a method for systematically making sense of discourse complexity, and utilized to understand how the institutional member has aligned situational and cultural frames to construct the account. The thesis both identifies and focuses its analysis on critical moments in the communication of risk, drawing on written as opposed to spoken accounts. Specifically, the thesis suggests that institutional members use the resources of discourse to render visible the 'risk situation at hand' and in so doing frame a particular view of risk which aims to steer action in particular directions. In addition, the thesis argues that institutional members foreground particular 'framing devices' that serve to both attenuate or amplify risk aspects of situations The study of written accounts of risk, it is argued, offers risk communicators insights into how institutional members construe risk within given contexts of situation as they seek to both anchor and align the situation to influence the actions of community members.

I, Arthur Stuart Firkins declare that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution and represents an original contribution to the field of linguistics drawing on the data and theories as referenced within the thesis.

Signed _____

On _____day _____month _____year.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank the academics who have supported me to write this thesis. First among them are Professor Christopher N. Candlin who has pioneered research in the area of professional discourse and who has been both my supervisor and co-writer of papers on the topic of risk. I would also like to thank Professor Anne Burns who has been an inspiration and of great assistance to me in writing this thesis. I therefore extend my gratitude to what I consider to be my university, Macquarie-Sydney. As a North Shore boy, Macquarie continues to be the University of the North Shore of Sydney. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Associate Professor David G Butt, and to Associate Professor Gail Forey who have also greatly assisted me in writing this thesis over the years. My debt is also extended to my many colleagues. From reading this thesis my debt to a large number of scholars should be evident and although I could never personally know them, their work continues to inspire my own. I would also like to acknowledge the support of my family, particularly my daughter Emma who was ten years old the year I began this thesis and is now at university herself, and to my father Arthur Firkins (snr). Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my partner Kaissa Traore for her support. Thank you to all the people who have encouraged and supported me to write this thesis.

Arthur Stuart Firkins

Singapore 2011

Preface

This thesis could not have been born out of library research alone or from the analysis of the data alone. It is also an outcome of my long professional engagement with risk. In 1987 I managed the adult programme for students who were deaf and blind for The Royal NSW Institute for Deaf & Blind Children, based at North Rocks in Sydney. These students faced many risks surrounding their integration and engagement with the community. In 1988-1990 I established three community based group homes for the SEE foundation, to accommodate state wards who had multiple disabilities, complex heath needs as well as sensory impairments. Establishing this lead me into a direct engagement with the risks these young people faced in all domains of their lives. In 1989, I worked with the New South Wales Department of Community Services, in the State Wide Behaviour Intervention Unit. This was the state's tertiary unit charges with intervening with people with behaviours that challenged the systems. Many of the behaviours were violent, self – injurious or placed families and staff in harm's way. I trained staff and parents in techniques that managed the risks associated with these often strange behaviours and worked in collaboration with psychiatrists, social workers, nurses, staff, parents,, schools. It was evident that many of the aberrant behaviours were specific to particular contexts and to particular interaction. In 1993 I became the assistant manager for community Services in the Inner West Area of Sydney a highly multicultural population and managed programmes for people with disabilities and their families, as well as child protection. This was a job which brought me to an understanding that culture influences how risk was perceived and managed. In 1997 I undertook to devolve a schedule five hospital, the Grosvenor Centre. This was a facility for seventy young people with severe disabilities and complex health needs. In addition I worked on placing the Carlton Unit, New South Wales's only respite facility for babies and children under five years with very complex

health needs. Project managing this task and dealing with the multiple concerns of staff and parents and also implementing the policy of the government was a practical exercise in managing risk at multiple levels. On the conclusion of this project I worked on policy development in the area of child protection, specifically surrounding Aboriginal Children in care facilities throughout New South Wales. This experience meant engaging with the political and cultural dimension of risk for both the children and the government.

In 2001 I accepted a job as a teacher in a school in Hong Kong, teaching English. This marked the end of my almost fifteen year career in community services. It was at this time I came into contact with Professor Christopher Candlin and with his interests in professional discourse. I also worked with students who were at risk of failure in the Hong Kong Education system. I also developed a more expansive view of risk assessment and risk communication with the gracious assistance of Professor Chris Candlin. Much of this view forms the platform of this thesis on risk. It is as much a thesis that has brought my own personal experiences with risk situations in interaction with the literature and data. In 2008 I worked for the South East Asian Minister of Education, which gave me the opportunity to consider the risks faced by teachers and students in the eleven member countries. It was very clear that people from diverse cultures viewed risks to students differently. Finally in 2009 I took on the challenge of managing the Northern Territory Department of Health and Families, Disability Team, based in Alice Springs, Central Australia. I was managing programmes to support people in remote communities, Aboriginal families, supporting the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, looking at issues that placed individual; and whole communities under risk. This challenging job was the final confirmation for me of the importance of risk management and risk communication in professional practice. This professional engagement with risk has lead to a much larger thesis than I first anticipated and now sets a firm research agenda on risk into the future.

Dedicated to the memory of my Mother, Edith Jean Firkins