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## **'You have to work from where they are': Academic leaders' talk about language development**

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## **'You have to work from where they are': Academic leaders' talk about language development**

Language development is a constitutive part of learning. In higher education, decontextualised language is integral to the learning of abstract concepts. Language development is crucial to the pedagogic processes of learning, teaching and assessment. Often language is only discussed in higher education when it becomes visible through errors or unexpected uses. Occasionally the fundamental role of language development is supported by national or institutional policies; however, often language development provision is dispersed and sporadic. Despite academic leaders being identified as key stakeholders in the development of successful institution-wide language development strategies, their understandings and conceptualisations of language development have rarely been the focus of in-depth study. This inductive, qualitative case study research investigates academic leaders' experiences and understandings of language development in higher education, both students' and their own. An inductive thematic analysis of the data leads to the development of three significant themes relating to language, learning and context. Inconsistencies and contradictions within those themes have important implications for policy development across all sites of higher education. Specifically, the contribution of this article is the analysis of inconsistencies through the lens of language as a social semiotic. The analysis highlights how students' language development opportunities can be limited by institutional practices.

**Keywords:** language development, language as social semiotic, discourse, power, academic leaders, higher education, policy

## Introduction

Language development is a constitutive part of learning (Vygotsky, 1986; Hasan, 2005, 2011; Coffin and Donohue, 2014). As Vygotsky has argued:

[t]he relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. In that process, the relation of thought to word undergoes changes that themselves may be regarded as development in the functional sense' (1986, p.218)

Alternative perspectives of language development view language itself as a conduit which requires remedial attention when used poorly (see Lillis and Turner, 2001, for a historical perspective). In higher education views about language development are particularly important given the diversification of the student body. Globally the number of students studying internationally (often in an additional language) is still increasing (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018). Others start university with little exposure to the expectations and the discourses of higher education. In some countries the significance of language development has been acknowledged by national policies which aim to ensure that institutions consider students' language proficiency at entry and make provision for their language development needs for the completion of their studies (eg. TEQSA in Australia, see Moore and Harrington, 2016, for a discussion). In other countries, such as the United States, there is a tradition of developmental writing courses in higher education, for example, composition studies (Tardy and Jwa, 2016). Meanwhile in countries with more recent development of English medium higher education, for example, Finland, multilingual language policies are often laid out, but can be 'implicit' and omit any discussion of the role of language learning (eg. Saaranin and Nikula, 2013). In the UK, there is no national policy relating to language or communication skills, although the Office for Students (2018) states that 'The provider must provide all students, from admission through to completion, with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.' (p.87). Nonetheless, institutional policies about language development are rare and the language development work that does take place is often dispersed and sometimes difficult to locate (Wingate, 2015).

A key impetus to the emergence of macro-level policy in Australia was a nationwide study that explored institution-wide academic language development policies. Dunworth, Drury, Kralik and Moore's (2014) study identifies eight factors in the successful implementation of a university-wide language development policy. Amongst these, the support and continued involvement of a member of the university's leadership team in driving the strategy is key. University leaders can provide support for policy development, consultation processes, and the engagement of multiple stakeholders (Dunworth et al, 2014). The importance of top-level support for university-wide initiatives related to language development has been endorsed by other writers (eg. Fenton-Smith and Gurney, 2015). Indeed, in the absence of specific macro-level policy, as in the UK currently, leadership support for meso-level policy is essential, if institutions are to do more than generate multiple, uncoordinated micro-level interventions. Fenton-Smith and Gurney (2015) define 'people with power [at the meso-level] ... as those who work in the upper strata of university leadership, such as presidents, vice chancellors and provosts (and their deputies) as well as deans, chairs and heads of academic departments and schools.' (p.78). Specifically, these are the people who can, 'wield the power to initiate, approve, perpetuate and/or terminate an

academic language policy across an institution (or significant part thereof)' (ibid). Fenton-Smith and Gurney find that depending on meso-level language development strategies may be challenging for a number of reasons: developments may not be planned sustainably; they can be dependent on personalities or short-term priorities; and 'communication between people with power and people with expertise could be improved.' (p.84) To address this latter issue, this study aims to investigate how conversations about university-wide language development policies could be facilitated by analysing academic leaders' discourses of language development in higher education. The term 'discourse' is specifically used in this research to mean 'a way of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular position' (Fairclough, 1995, p.14) and it is used to acknowledge issues of power when people talk about language development in higher education. As Fairclough states, 'it is mainly in discourse that consent is achieved, ideologies are transmitted, and practices, meanings, values and identities are taught and learnt' (1995, p.219). Building on this, the approach I am taking focusses on power as an ability 'to influence change' (Zhao and Baldauf, 2012, p.3) and acknowledges that privileged discourses can instantiate power: 'language is not powerful on its own - it gains power by the use powerful people make of it' (Wodack and Meyer, 2001, p.13).

This study takes an inductive, qualitative approach to investigate academic leaders' perspectives on and understandings of language development that could explain why an academic leader would or would not be inclined or empowered to play a role in the development of university-wide language policy. The research question is 'How do academic leaders account for the development of effective language use in higher education contexts?' where 'development' applies to students, as well as leaders themselves, and 'effective language use' is synonymous with semiotic mediation - the transmission of ideas between people using (in this case) linguistic codes (Hasan, 2005; Coffin and Donohue, 2014). The study explores the experiences of academic leaders within higher education to better understand their perspectives and to illuminate the discourses used around language development in higher education. Understanding those discourses, it is hoped, will facilitate future conversations about policy and practice. This study is part of a larger multiple case study involving multiple stakeholder groups. Whilst this single case study is of a group of academic leaders at one post-1992 UK university, the findings may resonate with a wider audience interested in these conversations both within and beyond the UK. Post-1992 UK universities as a group have historically and continue to recruit students with lower academic qualification levels (Raffe and Croxford, 2015), from less-advantageous socio-economic backgrounds (Boliver, 2015; Raffe and Croxford, 2015), often 'stylising themselves as "teaching-led"' (Boliver, 2015, p.613) and supportive of widening participation. This institutional context and commitment to social mobility become important considerations later on. In line with the inductive approach of the research design, I will first outline the methodological approach and the findings, then I will interweave the analysis of those findings with theoretical developments. Finally I will make recommendations for language policy makers in higher education.

### **Methodological approach**

This research analyses the discourses used by academic leaders in relation to language development in academic contexts. The research forms part of a larger multiple case study (as defined by Stake, 2006) with a single, post-1992 university in the UK as the

'quintain', the 'umbrella for the cases' (Stake, 2006, p.6). The overarching case of a post-1992 UK university is significant because of the explicit importance given to teaching, widening participation and social mobility in this kind of institution (Boliver, 2015). Language development is critical to the mission of widening participation and social mobility. This article reports the results of one of the single cases within this quintain: the stakeholder group, academic leaders. This article deliberately focusses on this group, because they have been identified as key stakeholders in the process of developing and implementing language policies in higher education (eg. Dunworth et al, 2014; Fenton-Smith and Gurney, 2015).

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews with four academic leaders (referred to as AL1 - AL4) whose remit included the oversight of learning and teaching. Although this is a small selection, the participants were uniquely well placed to provide data for the research question, 'How do academic leaders account for the development of effective language use in higher education contexts?' Participants were members of the university leadership group and had responsibility for the 'overall quality of student experience' (AL1) including 'quality assurance and learning, teaching [and] assessment development' (AL2). The academic leaders represented the four faculties within the institution and as such, were informed about current practices in each faculty. Their dual position based within a faculty with regular contact with teaching staff (including some teaching themselves, AL2, AL4) and on the highest level of university decision-making bodies ensured "*opportunity to learn*" (Stake, 2005, p.451, emphasis in original) about academic leaders' perspectives. They included 2 men (AL1, AL2) and 2 women (AL3, AL4). They were all experienced in their roles as academic leaders, had previously worked as lecturers, and had worked at other higher education institutions. Significantly, they were 'people with power' (Fenton-Smith and Gurney, 2015, p.78) to influence change and shape language development policy or strategy because of their position near the top of the university hierarchy.

The interview was designed to elicit the academic leaders' perceptions of two broad areas: the academic leaders' own language use and development; and students' language use and development, including the institutional provision available to enable such development. The first set of questions elicited the participants' perceptions of their own role, what they enjoyed about their role, and examples of successful and less successful communication. As part of this, participants were asked to reflect upon how they had come to be able to produce the successful communication. The second set of questions explored a hypothetical scenario of advising a course team with concerns about their students' language or communication. The purpose of this was to ascertain what provision was available already and to prompt the academic leaders to suggest other approaches or interventions that they would like to see. This suite of questions was designed to capture both the content and the discourses of language development. The interview format and questions were fully piloted with another academic leader, a department head. The four interviews lasted up to one hour each. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, and each transcription was returned to the interviewee for review. No review comments were requested or changes made in this process.

An inductive, rather than theory-led, initial coding (also sometimes called 'open coding' (Saldana, 2016, p.115)) was completed using a process of constant comparison (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The initial coding involved interrogating the transcripts for answers to the research question, 'How do academic leaders account for the development of effective language use in higher education contexts?' Constant comparison ensured that definitions of each initial code (henceforth 'node') were

iteratively adapted: some early nodes were abandoned, and some data was subsumed into new nodes as the coding proceeded across the four transcripts. All steps in this process were recorded in analytic memos (Saldana, 2016). The initial round of coding was reviewed and recorded on NVivo software and underwent peer review from three colleagues.

This process of initial coding was followed by a search for themes. This involved a recursive process of reviewing the data collated under each node (using print outs of NVivo coded data) and relating it back to the research question. Put simply, I asked the question 'What aspect of the research question is being referred to in the data in this node?' This first review cycle thus led to the creation of three overarching themes: effective language use, learning, and higher education context. The data in all but two nodes (relevance and assumptions) fitted clearly into one of these themes. Data under the nodes 'relevance' and 'assumptions' fitted under both themes of learning and effective language use.

Next, in order to develop a finer level of analysis and commensurate with the goal of analysing discourses used by academic leaders, I developed a series of 'as-statements' indicating how academic leaders talked about each broad theme (see Table 1). For example, they talked about 'language use as process' and they talked about 'learning as a responsibility'. These discourses created a series of sub-themes for the first two broad themes, effective language use and learning but did not add anything to the third broad theme, higher education context, which remained as a single category. At this level, data in some individual nodes related to more than one discursual category or sub-theme. For example, data under the node 'feedback' related to both talk about 'learning as an individual process', and talk about 'learning as a result of teaching'. Hence, a network was created. Together these analytical steps resulted in the creation of a hierarchical network of three themes, eight sub-themes, and 69 nodes (see Appendix 1 for a visual representation).

The network of nodes, sub-themes (discourses) and themes created matches Attride-Stirling's (2001) definition of a thematic network which 'aim[s] to explore the understanding of an issue or the signification of an idea, rather than to reconcile conflicting definitions of a problem' (2001, p.390). An additional process of coding took place to deepen the analysis by identifying which nodes related to academic leaders talking only about the development of their own language, or only about students' language development. Recording this secondary coding process in NVivo facilitated the identification of nodes which only related to one group. By isolating the data which refers only to academic leaders, or only to students, ie. looking at where discourses differ, we can see some interesting clusters of nodes around certain sub-themes (see Appendix 2 and Table 1). This will be discussed later.

## **Findings**

The interview data from the academic leaders in this study portrays a group of highly reflective individuals when asked about the development of their own language use. Interestingly, when asked to describe a communicative event from which they felt a sense of achievement, they all described a situation in which they had led a process of change, for example, a change to role structures, a change to a programme of courses, and a change to university processes. When discussing the scenario of a course leader concerned about students' language use, individual leaders came up with a wide range

of suggestions and all identified some similar issues, eg. resources and opportunities for dialogue between students and lecturers.

The academic leaders' talk demonstrates how they account for different people's language development, and in order to understand those accounts, I will discuss the data at the level of discourse (Fairclough, 1995, see below). The thematic hierarchical network (Appendices 1 and 2) which represents the coded data comprises three top-level themes, eight mid-level sub-themes, and 69 nodes, some of which exemplify other nodes (examples form the lowest level in Appendices 1 and 2). The top level themes relate directly to the research question, effective language use, learning, and context, whilst the sub-themes indicate the discourses used. Through thematic analysis I interpreted five discourses of language use, three discourses of learning, and the theme of context as enabling (or not).

Table 1 presents the hierarchy of themes, sub-themes and nodes, although for reasons of brevity only nodes relating to this discussion are shown, specifically, those relating only to academic leaders' language development (plain text - black nodes in Appendix 2), those relating only to students' language development (in italics - white nodes in Appendix 2), and an example of those relating to both (in bold - grey nodes in Appendix 2). Each discourse and theme is described below with sample data for illustration.

TABLE 1 HERE

Table 1. Hierarchical representation of themes, sub-themes and sample nodes. (**Bold indicates nodes based on data about both academic leaders' and students' language**, plain indicates nodes based on data about academic leaders' language development, *italics indicates nodes based on data about students' language development*)

Thematic network analysis of the data led to the development of a hierarchical network as described in Table 1. At the highest level, meta-themes were identified as: effective language use, learning and context. Under these sit five discourses of language use, three discourses of learning, and the theme of contextual enablers. Each discourse and theme is described below with sample data for illustration.

### **Language use as a process**

In the interview data, there was a discourse of language use as a process. This included concepts of time, 'it took me two years to overturn that policy' (AL1); space, 'we set up a room' (AL3); and successful and unsuccessful modes of communication, 'This pings into the inbox' (AL4). A discourse of language use as a process highlights the fact that language use is interactional, and that there are human participants sequentially creating and responding to moments of semiotic mediation: it is dialogic. It acknowledges that language use can be affected by the physical and temporal contexts. Interestingly, in this data there were some nodes which represent issues mentioned by academic leaders' own language development but not students': time, consequences and unsuccessful modes of communication.

### **Language use as interpersonal negotiation**



Complementary to, but separate from the discourse of language use as process was the discourse of language use as interpersonal negotiation. Here, the data highlights the rhetorical nature of language use, including aspects such as: audience awareness, 'I then started to think about the words that professional bodies, other stakeholders use', because 'if you want to get them to cooperate and engage with you, then you have to work from where they are' (AL4); purpose, 'trying to get people on board' (AL2); persuasion, 'the only way I can get them to do stuff is by kind of persuading them it's the right thing to do' (AL1); and the opportunity for dialogue or lack thereof, 'One person had written all the documentation ... So people were really uninformed.' (AL3). A discourse of language as interpersonal negotiation emphasises the relational aspects of semiotic interactions between people, and the considerations that need to be taken into account in order for the communication to be successful. Interestingly, important aspects of this discourse were also exclusively used in relation to academic leaders' own language use, namely, persuasion, statement of purpose, tone and relationships. Indeed one participant bemoaned the monologic tendencies of current pedagogic practices, 'most of what we do is in effect monologue ... we speak to them in lectures; they write back to us in essays.' (AL1) This will be discussed later.

### **Language use as a technical skill**

Language use as technical skill is a discourse which relates to the view that language is separable from meaning-making; it implies that language is a conduit that can be mastered (cf. Lillis and Turner, 2001). The academic leaders' references to threshold levels, 'once they reach that sort of threshold, ... it becomes the role of the academic tutor to help them improve' (AL3) and technical issues, '... he [a masters student] confuses the use of commas and full stops. So you get these quite weird sentences. And there's so much in them.' (AL2) demonstrate this discourse. This discourse was evident only when the academic leaders talked about students' language use and suggests a view of language as a remedial concern.

### **Language use as a developmental skill or attribute**

In contrast to the discourse of language use as a technical skill which can be mastered, the discourse of language use as a developmental skill highlights the idea that an individual's language use continually develops. This discourse is represented by understandings of complexity in language use, for example in a programme validation briefing document that needed to represent 'multiple stakeholders ... and those stakeholders would have different voices' (AL2); language and literacy gaps, 'The students were here and the course materials were there, and we just had no idea' (AL1); and language choices amongst the academic leaders themselves, 'that [negative experience] made me start to think about the nature of terms and language we use' (AL4), and the 'flavours' (AL2) that students need to develop: 'that language is always complex, it's always different from what ... students are familiar with ...' (AL2). This discourse highlights the ongoing potential for improvement amongst students and professionals, including academic leaders.

### **Language use as specific to context or goal**

Language use as specific to context or goal is a discourse which represents the concept of specificity of purpose and/or audience. This discourse includes an understanding that disciplinary discourses are special: 'there's a discipline thing about this ... There is a different way that you talk to different [academic] subjects.' (AL3). This discourse also captures the idea that provision to enhance students' language use benefits from that

specificity. In describing a model of language development provision she had supported elsewhere, AL3 describes how, 'the closer you integrate something for a student, and the more holistic and relevant they see it, the more successful it is. You know, so the language was very specific as well.' In contrast, AL1 identified how creating specific contexts for students could be used to improve the interactive nature of assignments, for example: 'if you had to report for a voluntary association or if you had to script a lecture for this performance ... getting them [students] into thinking about writing not just as regurgitating ...'. This discourse emphasises the particularities of language development in disciplinary discourses and how specificity can enhance provision and assessment or learning opportunities.

These five discourses provide an insight into academic leaders' beliefs and understandings of effective language use. I will now describe the themes associated with academic leaders' talk about learning.

### **Learning as an individual's process**

In the interviews with academic leaders about language development, there was a discernible discourse of learning as an individual's process including aspects such as experience, affect, practice, learning preferences, reflection, time and timing. Leaders talked candidly about their personal experiences, and even how their language use had improved, 'by getting it badly wrong' previously (AL1). They described the affective factors underlying their own language use, 'at that point I was probably feeling quite anxious' (AL4) and empathised with students, 'when we all made our first presentation, we're absolutely ... struck down with fear' (AL2). They also talk about the importance of practice for developing confidence 'the more and more you do them [presentations] ... you get your confidence.' (AL2) and the idea that students are a 'more visual generation than we were.' (AL1). The importance of reflection was also evident amongst the leaders' own processes, 'that stopped me in my tracks and ever since then, I'm very mindful of the nature of the communication' (AL4); and that the opportunity to reflect can be missing for students, 'a lot of the time, it's not getting the students to reflect on their experience of the presentation' (AL2). Significantly, timing and time were also mentioned as important to language development and form part of this discourse. Timing was important for learning opportunities to be most useful: it is 'about being local and relevant and timely' (AL3); whereas time was acknowledged as important because, 'the only thing about communication skills as we know, it's not something you can fix straight away ... it is a learning process.' (AL2) This discourse highlights personal experience and individual differences, and acknowledges the importance of 'risk-free' (AL2), timely opportunities for learning from mistakes and practice with reflection that are integral to learning opportunities.

### **Learning as a result of teaching**

Beyond the importance of the individual learner in the development of effective language use, the academic leaders acknowledged the role that teaching is expected to play. Examples from the discourse of learning as a result of teaching include: talk about curriculum design, 'we literally had ... these [language development] classes scheduled at the end of a session ... partly embedded in a session ...' (AL3); the use of models, 'a lot of colleagues ... would get students to ... deconstruct academic articles, ... student work, ... "So this is the kind of thing that you should be doing"' (AL2); and feedback, both to the academic leaders themselves 'actually having other senior colleagues around me saying 'If we use those particular words, then we're mirroring back'' (AL4) and to students who receive feedback on one assessment genre, but then need to learn to

communicate effectively in a new genre - 'I don't think we always provide [students] with that kind of supportive, formative, constructive feedback, in the way that would be helpful, in a repetitive manner.' (AL2) This discourse highlights the perceived importance of explicit teaching as part of language development, from curriculum design, through to teaching and constructive formal and informal feedback.

### **Learning as responsibility**

The third discourse relating to learning is that of learning as responsibility. The academic leaders talked about the responsibility of the broader institution, for example, that registry colleagues may spot patterns in student data (AL4). The idea that course teams may be given the responsibility for including language development in modules, it was suggested, could risk rejection: 'It's not our job to teach students English skills' (AL1). This might be either because of 'a defensiveness born of not knowing' or because of an idea that, "'that's for the little people'" (AL1). Interestingly, there were also tensions in the academic leaders' own discourse with a recognition that, 'we assume too much I think, and don't take responsibility for enough while we're teaching the students' (AL2). There was even a lack of clarity about their own leadership role within the university: 'What is our mandate in regard to this area?' (AL4). This is perhaps the most internally fraught discourse within the academic leaders because of their acknowledgement of the responsibility, the enormity of what it means across a whole institution, and the lack of clear ownership.

The final theme further explores issues of institutional context in the consideration of language development in higher education.

### **Context as enabling (or not)**

The academic leaders who took part in this study were all influential in their roles, and all enjoyed being able to 'make change happen' (AL3). It is interesting, therefore, to analyse their talk about the context in which academic language development takes place and contextual factors which enable that development, or hinder it. Much of the talk in the interviews begins positively. For example, in the institution which forms the backdrop for this case study, language development provision is described thus, 'on a good day ... like a firework going off in the sky: it's beautiful; there are lots of lovely colours; it makes a lovely pattern; but it's not connected' (AL4). There were constructive ideas for using existing university processes to support the development of language use, through for example, 'our review of courses' (AL2). In addition, the idea of enabling existing academic staff 'so that they would feel more confident and feel they had some kinds of tools at their disposal' (AL1) was mooted. There were also several practical suggestions for improving the situation, including: integrating a language expert into a faculty or department (AL3); 'more formative assessment' (AL2); an 'online repository' (AL4); and 'better support [for English for academic purposes]' (AL1). Overall there was an optimism that 'it would be great' (AL4) to have something systematic in place. There were, however, limiting factors such as resource and capacity issues - 'I know that the capacity to support others is challenged' (AL4) - and an example of how in another institution, a colleague brought in for this work 'was absolutely inundated' (AL3). There was also a feeling of not quite knowing the best strategic direction: 'there is a real difficulty about thinking how do you scale this stuff ... we're a big ... institution' (AL1). And one solution was to move the responsibility upwards, 'we need to put a bit of institutional, faculty kind of weight behind it' (AL1); 'we need to kind of hold [top level leader's] feet to the fire' (AL1). The theme of context as enabler highlights the complexities of enthusiastic leadership, full of ideas and

understandings of the limitations of the local context, but ultimately acknowledging that connectivity, integration, staff development, and resources require strategic, unified direction.

In sum, the discourses highlight a range of beliefs or concepts held by academic leaders about language development. The discourse of language use as a process indicates an understanding of the interactional nature of successful communication which can be affected by physical, temporal and modal affordances or constraints, ie. how space, place, time and mode of communication can support or limit effective language use. The discourse of language as interpersonal negotiation demonstrates the value placed on relationships between speaker (writer) and audience. The discourse of language as a technical skill evidenced the view of language as a remedial concern, whereas the discourse of language as a developmental skill highlighted the belief in the potential for continuing improvement for all. Lastly, in terms of language use discourses, the importance of specificity in both language use, such as assessments, and language development opportunities was supported by the discourse of language use as specific to context or goal.

In terms of learning, there were three complementary discourses: learning as individual process; learning a result of teaching; and learning as responsibility. The first of these indicates a belief that personalised language learning opportunities with 'risk-free', timely opportunities for learning from practice and feedback are key. The second demonstrates that the academic leader participants believe in the importance of explicit teaching as part of language development from curriculum design through to teaching and planned constructive formal and informal feedback opportunities. Thirdly, the discourse of learning as responsibility highlighted the tensions felt by academic leaders between acknowledging a range of responsible individuals or groups, but a lack of overall ownership for the issue of language development.

Finally, the theme of context as enabling (or not) illuminates the complexities of large institutions. Despite being supportive and enthusiastic in their intentions, individual leaders acknowledge the need for a strategic, unified direction.

A further discussion of these discourses and their implications for policy development follows.

### **Discussion and theoretical analysis**

The three broad themes - effective language use, learning and context as enabling (or not) - described in Table 1, encapsulate the discourses used by academic leaders about language and learning. Viewing these discourses through the lens of language as a social semiotic (Hasan, 2005, building on the work of Vygostky, Bernstein and Halliday), enables a deeper understanding of some of the inconsistencies and complexities in the findings. Hasan's (2005) model of semiotic mediation processes describe effective language use and learning as intermental (external) and intramental (internal) semiotic mediation respectively (see Table 2).

TABLE 2 HERE

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes categorised by semiotic processes. (**Bold indicates nodes based on data about both academic leaders' and students' language**, plain indicates nodes based on data about academic leaders' language development, *italics indicates nodes based on data about students' language development*)

Coffin and Donohue (2014) provide a useful visual representation of this semiotic mediation in a teaching and learning encounter between a lecturer and a student (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1. Semiotic mediation in a pedagogic intervention (based on Coffin and Donohue, 2014, p.28)

Figure 1 shows that there are several processes taking place when a lecturer scaffolds learning in order to 'reconfigure the learner's conceptual structures' (Coffin and Donohue, 2014, p.28), in other words to teach them something new. Firstly the lecturer initiates an instance of external semiotic mediation (usually but not only using language). The student receives the input 'intermentally', and hopefully proceeds to the 'intramental' process of developing their understanding. Additional communication may continue, and the combination of external and internal semiotic mediation leads to a reconfiguration of the student's conceptual process: the student learns something. This satisfies the lecturer's initial objective of the pedagogic intervention (Coffin and Donohue, 2014, p.28).

The intramental process of learning in Figure 1 can be compared to the discourses of learning in Table 2 which come from the participants' comments on language development. The academic leaders' discourses of learning (as individual process; as a result of teaching; and as a responsibility) suggest an implicit acknowledgement of the intramental process that takes place. For example, learning as individual process includes student engagement (see Table 2). However, the discourses of learning also acknowledge external factors, such as risk-free, timely opportunities for practice and feedback (on language development), and explicit teaching that is designed through the curriculum. Moreover, the discourse of learning as a responsibility reveals both a contradiction and a tension amongst the academic leaders. If we consider learning as an intramental semiotic process, responsibility for learning inherently lies with the students, yet the academic leaders note various groups within the institution who are responsible for supporting the process. At the same time, they were not clear on who was ultimately responsible for language development: 'What is our mandate in regard to this area?' (AL4). In terms of developing a meso-level language policy, there are clear recommendations that can be made in relation to practice, feedback and curriculum design, but the latter point is concerning: where does the responsibility lie?

In order to consider other discourses from the data, it is useful to develop a fuller picture of the pedagogic processes in higher education by adding an additional layer to the process represented in Figure 1: the process of the student communicating back to the lecturer by producing an assignment. This more closely resembles the scenario that

the participants were asked to respond to: a situation in which a course leader is concerned about students' language use (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2 here

Figure 2. Semiotic mediation in an assessment (adapted from Coffin and Donohue, 2014, p.28)

Figure 2 represents the situation of a student creating a piece of work for assessment in order to gain a grade. This requires the student to use language effectively (written and/or spoken) to convince the lecturer that they have mastered the content (and form) of the subject, and reconfigure the lecturer's understanding of what the student knows (Coffin and Donohue, 2014). In contrast to Figure 1, the starting point here is the student's objective of obtaining a grade, and in order to do that, the student needs to reconfigure the lecturer's understanding of the student's knowledge of subject (Coffin and Donohue, 2014, p.29) which importantly but implicitly includes effective language use in the subject. Three key discourses are interesting to focus on here because they include several aspects which related solely to students (Table 1). Firstly, there are the seemingly contradictory discourses of language use as technical skill and language use as developmental skill or attribute. The first of these identifies a view of students' language as a technical issue eg. 'confusing the use of commas and full stops' (AL2), whereas the second highlights the complexity of different 'flavours' (AL2) that a student needs to use. In addition, the discourse of language use as specific to context or goal identifies the usefulness of encouraging students to explicitly consider the specificity of language choices in intermental semiotic mediation processes: 'if you had to script a lecture for this performance ... getting them into thinking about writing not just as regurgitating ...' (AL1).

The discourses relating to the intermental processes in Figure 2 highlight the complexities of both the range of language that students need to develop and the contradictory discourses surrounding language development. In terms of university-wide policy development these contradictory discourses need to be explored, if not resolved, so as to ensure that consistent interpretations are made by different stakeholders. Moreover, the concepts of specificity of context or goal can provide a useful framework for language development.

The third instance of semiotic mediation which needs consideration relates to the academic leaders' own language use. Figure 3 represents the semiotic mediation processes at play when an academic leader communicates with a member of staff in order to effect a change in practice - the scenario described by all four participants as their example of successful communication. In many ways this resembles the scenario of a student submitting an assignment in order to receive a grade. The initiator attempts to reconfigure another person's conceptual understandings, in order to achieve an externally verifiable outcome (ie. the allocation of an assessment grade or a change in practice). The only difference is that in Figures 2 and 3, the holders of power or authority, are on the left of the diagram. Therefore, we can say that whilst a student in Figure 2 appeals to a higher authority for a grade, in Figure 3 the academic leader holds authority when asking colleagues to change their practice.

### FIGURE 3 HERE

Figure 3. Semiotic mediation in an academic leadership intervention

This difference between Figures 2 and 3 becomes increasingly significant when we look at aspects of the discourses mentioned by academic leaders exclusively in relation to their own effective language use. When talking about their own intermental semiotic mediation processes, academic leaders' discourse includes specific aspects of language use as a process and language use as interpersonal negotiation which are not included in relation to students. Specifically, in terms of language as a process, their talk about their own effective language use includes issues of time in communication; problems with modes of communication; and the consequences of communication. In terms of language as interpersonal negotiation, they mention purpose in communication, relationships, tone and persuasion. On the one hand, this divergence between the discourses of effective language use and learning could be considered descriptive of the current situation in this case study. On the other hand, the discourses themselves can be seen to privilege aspects of effective language use to those with authority. When considered in conjunction with the acknowledgement that some teaching and learning 'is in effect monologue' (AL1), the divergence becomes fundamentally important. In terms of developing meso-level language policy, issues such as time, mode of communication, consequences and purpose of communication, relationships, tone and persuasion that academic leaders have identified as having benefitted from should be available for students to benefit from.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to investigate academic leaders' experiences and understandings of the development of effective language use in order to inform discussions about university-wide language development policies. Through a process of thematic analysis, three themes were interpreted from the data: effective language use, learning and context as enabling (or not). Amongst those themes I construed five discourses of language use - as interpersonal negotiation; as process; as technical skill; as developmental skill; and as specific to context or goal - and three discourses of learning - as individual process; as a result of teaching; and as responsibility. Combining a language as a social semiotic approach with a view of power enables a critical analysis of the data. Throughout the data there is optimism and enthusiasm for change shown by the academic leaders with an understanding that all communication relies on an understanding of the audience: 'you have to work from where they are' (AL4). However, an analysis of the discourses and the complexities and inconsistencies between and within them reveals important issues that should be considered by those interested in creating language development policies in higher education.

The resulting considerations for policy development include clarifying where the responsibility lies within an institution; identifying and resolving contradictory discourses, such as language use as developmental or technical skill; and offering students the same opportunities for language development as those experienced by leaders themselves. In practice, my findings indicate that academic leaders should agree clear lines of responsibility for students' language development. They should provide opportunities for academics to discuss what they expect of students' academic language. Academic leaders and lecturers should acknowledge explicitly that their discourses

about language use are important, because different practical outcomes follow from talking about language as a developmental or a technical skill. Academic leaders should also ensure that students have opportunities to develop their language through risk free practice that allows timely opportunities for learning from mistakes and reflection integrated into the learning process.

These conclusions emanate from research into a small participant group of academic leaders responsible for learning and teaching within a single post-1992 UK university, with a commitment to teaching, widening participation and social mobility. Its conclusions might also be relevant to any institution with similar commitments. However, these conclusions may well also resonate with and be useful to those involved in the formulation of language policy in higher education institutions in a variety of international contexts. This is because language development is germane to all educational contexts, but especially higher education contexts where success is dependent on the acquisition of academic discourses that rely on abstract language. As previously mentioned, this research forms one part of a multiple case study that investigates different stakeholder groups. A compilation of data from different stakeholders is the logical next step. Moreover, a further possible contribution to the research field would be to undertake a direct analysis of the interview data using the social semiotic approach.

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Appendix 1 Thematic hierarchical network of themes, subthemes and nodes representing academic leaders' discourse about language development

Appendix 2 Thematic hierarchical network of themes, subthemes and nodes representing academic leaders' discourse about language development (academic leaders talking only about academic leaders in black; academic leaders talking only about students in white)