

PLM2026 plenary lecture

The '(meta)language of communication' and 'ecological hybridity': Reflections on the conditions and consequences of language/communication research in healthcare settings

Srikant Kumar Sarangi (Aalborg University)

The nexus between natural sciences and social/human sciences is an age-old phenomenon, with the hardliners foregrounding the separation between these paradigms of human inquiry across epistemological and ontological grounds. The moderates, however, highlight the mutuality of influence and see commonality in terms of evidence-based knowledge claims, albeit drawing upon the inseparability of fact and value in language use and the inevitability of metacommunication underpinning any communicative act. Communicating evidence-based knowledge claims across epistemological/ontological edges remains a particular challenge for language/communication researchers.

Within the domain of healthcare delivery – and by default in healthcare education – effective communication is being increasingly recognised, globally, as a key variable for the optimization of healthcare outcomes across clinic/hospital/community and public health settings. However, amongst healthcare practitioners/educators/policy makers, language/communication is variously understood (i) as common sense, (ii) as art and (iii) as behaviour, but rarely as (iv) the science of interpretation. Such differential conceptualizations have contingent and lasting consequences in credibly translating language/communication-based research findings for optimal uptake.

In this presentation, I reflect on my work over the last three decades in healthcare delivery across settings as diverse as general practice, genetic counselling and emergency medicine to highlight the advantages and shortcomings associated with what I call 'the (meta)language of communication' across disciplinary/professional boundaries. I focus specifically on the barriers that become insurmountable with 'the use of metalanguage' as part of one's expert system – an emblem of scientific mentality and expertise. In my view, the '(meta)language of communication' extends to include the modality of collaboration entailing not only 'disciplinary others' but, crucially, 'professional others' in the spirit of transdisciplinarity, which can be characterized via the metaphor of 'marriage', marked by both ecology and hybridity. With illustrative exemplars from empirical studies in different healthcare settings, I suggest the integrated notion of 'ecological hybridity' as a way of facilitating a much desired '(meta)language of communication'.