

Investigating communication and professional communities at international events

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Abstract

This article reports on a research project investigating communication at several international events held in Italy and focusing on grapes and wine. It also incorporates subsequent research and presents the project as a case to illustrate the way different notions of community were considered during the research process and to examine contextual factors such as relationships, roles and level of expertise of interactants. The article draws on a series of studies to provide a richer picture of the complexity of relations characterizing communicative events in international professional contexts, especially when expertise, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation come increasingly into play. It also gives attention to how project outcomes led to new research and data collection, course development and further interdisciplinary collaboration.

Keywords: intercultural and international business communication, business discourse, professional communication, community of practice, industry events.

Resumen

Investigando la comunicación y las comunidades profesionales en los encuentros internacionales

Este artículo describe un proyecto en el que se investiga la comunicación en diversos encuentros internacionales del sector empresarial vitivinícola celebrados en Italia. También incorpora investigación derivada de dicho estudio y presenta el proyecto como ejemplo con el que ilustrar la manera en que se consideraron diversas nociones de comunidad durante el proceso investigador, asimismo pretende examinar factores contextuales como relaciones, roles y niveles de experiencia entre los participantes. El artículo se inspira en diversos estudios para

aportar una imagen más completa de la complejidad de las relaciones que caracterizan los eventos comunicativos en contextos profesionales internacionales, especialmente en aquellos casos en los que entran en juego la experiencia y el hecho de compartir y generar conocimiento. También se presta atención al modo en el que los resultados originales han generado nueva investigación, la recogida de nuevos datos, el desarrollo de cursos y la colaboración interdisciplinaria adicional.

Palabras clave: comunicación intercultural e internacional en los negocios, discurso empresarial, comunicación profesional, comunidad de práctica, encuentros empresariales.

Introduction

In recent years, research on communication in intercultural and international business settings has given greater attention to the business context and more generally the need to go beyond texts themselves (Bhatia, 2004; Bhatia & Bremner, 2012; Bhatia et al., 2013). While the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of participants may influence interactions in different ways, a range of other factors also comes into play, from professional roles to relationships, from level of expertise to shared knowledge. In addition, in terms of training and learning, the role played by socialization, situated learning, communities of practice, and participation in professional contexts outside the classroom has also been recognized (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Bremner, 2012).

The growing interest in English used as a lingua franca in business (see, among others, Poncini, 2002, 2003 & 2004a; Nickerson, 2005; Rogerson-Revell, 2007 & 2008; Louhiala-Salminen & Charles, 2006; Ehrenreich, 2010), and more specifically “Business English as a Lingua Franca” (BELF) as termed by Louhiala-Salminen, Charles and Kankaanranta (2005) and later “English as Business Lingua Franca” (Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, this volume), implies a focus on settings involving participants from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Here, too, it is important to take into consideration the wider professional context as well as the immediate circumstances when investigating discourse in multilingual settings and in particular the use of English as a Lingua Franca alongside the occasional use of other languages.

Even when the focus of research is other than code-switching, giving attention to switches between languages in naturally occurring spoken

interactions provides a richer understanding of intercultural encounters. Language alternation holds the potential to facilitate communication in business settings by achieving cooperation and comprehension (Charles, 2002), with other languages besides English providing “help” (Louhiala-Salminen, 2002) when business communication takes place in English. Research on multicultural business meetings conducted mainly in English has illustrated how the occasional use of languages other than English serves particular purposes – see, for instance, Poncini (2003 & 2004a), on meetings with participants from up to 14 countries using English as a lingua franca, or Virkkula-Räisänen (2010) on multilingual meetings involving Finnish and Chinese participants with a Finnish manager acting as mediator.

In the meetings analyzed by Poncini (2003), different languages were used during parts of the meetings to facilitate understanding, ensure correct product details, and highlight an interpersonal element in the company’s relationship with each distributor, while at the same time underlining the multicultural nature of the group. Indeed, the use of different languages may serve practical needs or represent a cooperative element and is thus worthy of attention when examining international and intercultural business communication, even when communication takes place mainly in English.

Moreover, interactions may shape and be shaped by other contextual features such as those connected to business relationships and the individual expertise of meeting participants. The analysis of transcribed recordings of multicultural business meetings (Poncini, 2002 & 2004a) showed that one particular participant, a Finnish distributor, was seen to use a range of discursive strategies in different interchanges during the meeting. In one interchange he uses a number of positive lexical items to initiate a change in a company decision. In another he uses explicit and implicit negative language and questions in raising an issue connected to packaging. In one case, this speaker’s stance on a product manual was explicitly critical, while in another interchange he hedges his use of implicit negative evaluation when personally testing the performance of a product and inviting the chair of the meeting to examine the product. Many of this distributor’s evaluations relate to his role in the business relationship, his own business activity and his expertise. His awareness of the limits connected to the performance of a product, for example, stem from his own technical expertise. In short, the variety of linguistic choices made by the Finnish participant during interactions at different points of the meetings suggests that situational factors related to business activities, technical expertise and

the history of the relationship play a role in his discourse. In the context of the meetings investigated, it would be difficult to attribute a particular strategy to this participant's national cultural background. Likewise, the Finnish manager whose communication was examined in Virkkula-Räisänen's (2010) study was seen to adjust to goals of the business community – his own as well as his manager's – and consequently shift between the participant roles of author, animator and principal (Goffman, 1981), with the study also showing how an individual can exploit language as part of a broader semiotic repertoire to accomplish tasks and align toward different roles.

Besides situational factors, the wider business context itself may encompass local as well as global issues and agendas, some more apparent than others. The international wine industry, for example, represents an interesting blend between global and local because of the local elements important to grape growing and wine making, such as climate, soil, local culture and traditions. Regional associations of wine producers and grape growers, together with the individual firms they represent, continue to face new challenges calling for innovation, knowledge sharing and internationalization. Local and regional governments and other institutions, departments of agriculture, and other local firms in the agro-food industry are also involved in this process. Boundaries between various types of organizations thus become blurred when events, research, and other initiatives are promoted and organized.

This article reports on a research project investigating communication at international events in the wine industry organized in northern Italy. It draws on a series of studies to provide a richer picture of the complexity of relations characterizing communicative events in global professional contexts, especially when expertise, knowledge sharing and knowledge creation come increasingly into play. It also describes how insights emerging from the analysis and continued contact with some of the event participants led to new data collection and interdisciplinary collaboration, and it incorporates some of this subsequent research. The rest of the article is organized as follows. The next section provides background on the industry events and draws on the series of studies to illustrate the way different notions of community were considered at certain points of the research process and to examine contextual factors such as business relationships, roles and level of expertise. The article then discusses key findings from one of the studies, which focuses on spoken discourse at one of the events. The concluding remarks include considerations based on the 2009 event

and new data collection, giving attention to how project outcomes led to new research, course development and increased interdisciplinary collaboration.

A series of events: New visions for communicating the future

The first convention dedicated to Nebbiolo grapes was held in Sondrio, Valtellina, in the Lombardy region of Italy. This grape variety is grown mainly in northern Italian regions and less so in “New World” wine producing nations such as the U.S. and Australia. Participants attending the first convention were from Italy, the U.S., Mexico, Australia, South Africa and Switzerland and consisted of vineyard owners, researchers, journalists, experts on viticulture and wine from around the world, members of the local community, and others involved with the organization. Participants from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds were thus included, and members of different professional communities sharing a common interest were involved from the start. A similar range of participants characterized the second convention held two years later in the Piedmont region of Italy and the third convention, held in Sondrio three years later, though in this case there were fewer participants from abroad. The conventions lasted 2-3 days, and I was invited to speak about my research and work at the second and third conventions, where I was also a participant-observer.

Starting the project: Methods and data

More than a year before the first convention took place, permission was obtained from the organizers to conduct research and collect data at the event. Methods and data included participant observation, semi-structured interviews with participants, audio recordings of interactions (transcribed and analyzed), analyses of websites (conducted prior to the event), and written texts such as emails that organizers and participants sent to each other before the event and made available to the author after the event. After preliminary research conducted the year prior to the convention (see Poncini (2004b) on how websites and brochures for wineries communicate local elements to international audiences) and data collection at the event itself, it became apparent that the international wine industry is characterized by a unique intersection between global and local: it involves international

markets as well as local elements such as climate, soil, local culture and traditions, important to viticulture and wine making.

Research that began with the first convention, then, represented an opportunity to explore the rich and complex backgrounds that individuals bring to professional encounters in international business contexts and to investigate which contextual factors might influence – and be influenced by – the interaction. The research project followed the author's earlier work (Poncini, 2004a), which had already shown that in approaching intercultural interactions it is limiting to view participants as representatives of a national culture, attributing interactional style to the national culture of an individual speaker. A range of other factors may also be involved to varying extents, from professional roles to relationships, from level of expertise to shared knowledge, along with any issues and agendas that intertwined with the wider professional context. “Looking at things differently” – whether the immediate interactional context, other situational factors, or the wider social, historical or economic context – became key from the start of the research process and when involvement with the convention and industry continued through 2009 and beyond. Looking at things differently leads to richer results and holds the potential for a more innovative approach and a greater impact (Rusk, Poncini & McGowan, 2011). Indeed, this is a key point emerging from the project.

Spoken discourse: Professional worlds and shared practices

One of the studies investigated spoken discourse during a winery visit organized in conjunction with the first convention – Poncini (2007) reports on the study. Data consist of audio recordings, which were transcribed, and field notes were taken during observations. At the beginning of the visit an Italian wine producer accompanied two producers from California as they visited his facilities. The three wine producers first spoke about their respective businesses while touring the wine-making facilities. The group then tasted several wines in a meeting room, where they were joined partway through by a group of participants from Croatia: a wine producer with an interpreter, and several journalists. At this point the group came to be characterized by participants who not only were from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but also represented different professional communities. In addition, the group shared common interests, being at this particular event, and the study underlined their display of particular shared practices. Although other factors besides the changing group composition

during the visit must be kept in mind (for instance, individual style or level of skill and comfort speaking English), and despite limits characterizing research on spoken interactions in groups (see Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004), some considerations can be made about the intercultural interactions examined at the event. For example, the analysis of transcribed spoken data and field notes showed similarities in the way these participants used (or withheld) evaluative language during the tasting. The owner of the winery, for example, did not use evaluative language while others tasted wine but rather waited in silence. Looking at this as “simply” intercultural interaction would clearly be missing the rich wider picture, as can be seen in the next section, which presents methods and findings drawn from selected examples. More specifically, the analysis undertaken for this particular study focuses on the use of evaluation (Thompson & Hunston, 2000) and specialized lexis concerning grape growing, wine making and wines, with attention given to knowledge already shared by interactants and the linguistic means with which they build shared knowledge and common ground.

The example below illustrates how, during the first day of the visit, the positive value of experimenting and trying different things is built up by the three speakers – two wine producers from the U.S. (called “Tom” and “Denise” in the study) and one from Italy (“Stefano” in the study) Both Denise (see Excerpt 1, line 5) and Tom (see Excerpt 1, lines 6 and 7) implicitly evaluate this as positive, with Denise in line 5 shifting speaker roles and using “like you said” to refer to Stefano’s earlier mention of experimenting. Tom signals his agreement by back-channelling (“exactly” shown between double parentheses in line 5), and in lines 6 and 8 he uses repetition to indicate they have tried different fermentation at different temperatures. Both Tom and Stefano use “yeah” and “yes” throughout the exchange, while other choices signalling interpersonal involvement include lexical repetition in lines 12 and 13 by Denise and Stefano. In this example and the ones that follow, inaudible speech or speech that cannot be distinguished by the recording is displayed by means of parenthesis with no text in between brackets (“()”) with any distinguishable words included, while overlapping speech and contextual information is shown between double parenthesis (“(())”).

Excerpt 1:

- 1 Denise no but but we’re interested ‘cause we’re still learning
 2 Stefano yeah

- 3 Denise we've only produced for five years now and it's every year
 4 Stefano yeah yeah
 5 Denise and every year you have to experiment ((Tom: exactly)) like you
 said and try something different to know the correct temperature,
 the correct length
 6 Tom we've done very cold fermentation
 7 Stefano yes
 8 Tom we've done very warm
 9 Stefano it's uh Nebbiolo needs a temperature , at the beginning of the
 maturation to extract the
 () ((Denise: colors)) ()
 10 Tom yeah
 11 Stefano the colors, but I think it's dangerous to ()
 12 Denise just too fast
 13 Stefano yes too fast at the temperature
 14 Tom yeah

What begins to be noticeable in this part of the visit is the kind of common ground represented by the recognition of the issue of color connected to wines made with Nebbiolo grapes (line 9, despite inaudible speech, shows that Denise's overlapping speech includes mention of "color"). The data here and elsewhere shows the question of (Nebbiolo wine) color be considered of value to people interested in Nebbiolo, whether wine producers or other professionals and experts. Excerpt 1 provides an indication of how the analysis also draws on Goffman's (1981) participation framework, with Denise's comments in line 5 referring back to Stefano's earlier mention of experimenting and his positive view of it while at the same time expressing her similar viewpoint. Goffman (1981) distinguishes between the different roles which participants in a situation can take on, as opposed to a single category of speaker and a single category of hearer, intended in the acoustical sense. An unratiſed participant may be a "bystander" or an "overhearer" (inadvertent, non-official listener) or an "eavesdropper" (engineered, non-official follower of talk). Goffman's (1981) "production formats" relate to the role of the speaker, who can be animator, author and principal. Levinson (1988) refers to these as "production roles". The "animator" physically utters the word(s), the "author" represents the origin of the beliefs and sentiment (and perhaps also composes the words), and the "principal" is the person whose viewpoint or position is expressed. The speaker's role may involve all three. Although some scholars, including Levinson (1988), have further systematized Goffman's (1981) categories

(see also Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004), what is of interest here is shifts in participant roles rather than all possible participant roles.

Heightened interpersonal involvement and collaboration

In the data for the first part of the winery visit, the tour of facilities and the wine tasting in the meeting room, it is especially noticeable that as the three speakers continue to exchange information about professional experiences, as shown in Excerpt 1, they make linguistic choices contributing to heightened interpersonal involvement. This is done mainly by means of frequent back-channelling (some of it overlapping), repetition, explicit agreement, evaluative language, switches to Italian, and occasional laughter, as illustrated in Excerpt 2. Latched speech is indicated by the use of “=” right before and/or after the latched item.

Excerpt 2:

- 1 Tom with sugar (left) ((Stefano: yes)) for fermentation
- 2 Stefano uh because what we want to do, the barrique (draws) a net (that keeps the) color
- 3 Denise that's what we learned ((Stefano: the teacher)) yesterday=
- 4 Stefano =the teacher told yesterday morning=
- 5 Denise =two days ago maybe=
- 6 Stefano =yesterday=
- 7 Denise =ok=
- 8 Stefano =yesterday morning, Professor [Last Name deleted] ((Denise: yeah)) he told sure that the small barrel=
- 9 Denise =you get better color
- 10 Tom (yeah)
- 11 Stefano you keep more color
- 12 Tom always in the barrels you get more colors
- 13 Stefano the problem is that too, you don't want to cover ((Denise: no)) the (aroma) with the grape with the oak ((Denise: no))
- 14 Denise mm hmm
- 15 Stefano and in fact it's because we don't use any uh uhm, American oak?
- 16 Denise right neither do we ((Stefano: no sorry but)) no no we don't like it ((Tom laughs))
- 17 Stefano no I think it's good for other kinds of ((Denise and Tom: unintelligible overlap)) ((Denise: for [Grape Variety 1]))
- 18 Tom but not for Nebbiolo
- 19 Denise but not for Nebbiolo
- 20 Stefano maybe [Grape Variety 2] can also be interesting with great result

- 21 with Nebbiolo it's my opinion
 22 Denise no no
 23 Tom I agree=
 24 Denise =we agree ((everyone laughs))
 25 Tom we tried it all
 26 Denise French and Slovenian

The first twelve lines illustrate the importance given to the issue of color, with speakers using repetition and overlapped and latched speech to express their agreement. Two of the speakers refer to a presentation made by a professor the day before, thus illustrating shifts in participation frameworks in lines 3-8 as they also establish which day of the convention he spoke. After that, they focus on kinds of oak, and Denise and Tom use different means to agree with Stefano's negative view of American oak in lines 13 and 15, while in line 17 Stefano qualifies his statement by specifying that the evaluation depends on the kind of grape variety involved. For example, Denise first agrees in line 16; then refers to the behavior they have in common (not using American oak) and states they do not like it, using "we" to refer to their respective winery. Another example is Tom's rephrasing in line 18 of Stefano's evaluation as to the relevance of American oak for certain grape varieties, echoed by Denise in line 19.

Toward the end of Excerpt 2, Tom and Denise explicitly agree with Stefano in their latched speech (lines 23-24), with Tom using "I" to evoke his individual identity, and Denise again using "we" to speak for their winery, the two of them or possibly the group of three, potentially contributing to greater common ground. Speakers thus highlight their shared viewpoints in a range of ways. Moreover, Stefano shows face concerns when he says he is sorry (overlap in line 16) about his negative evaluation of American oak, recognizing that Tom and Denise are from the same country as the origin of the name of the oak. The cumulative effect of using the features thus far discussed is that the speakers "create shared worlds and viewpoints" which reinforce relationships, as discussed by Carter and McCarthy (2004: 69).

The three speakers also collaborate to produce specialized terms in English when these terms were first introduced in Italian during discussions in English, and they used more Italian as the visit progressed – see Poncini (2007) for a discussion. Excerpt 3 below provides an example of what can be called "a collaborative effort" to produce the English term for a specialised term first used in Italian. Though Denise, who speaks Italian,

appears to have understood Stefano's use of the Italian *raspo* ("grape stalk" or "stem") in line 1, when Stefano hesitates in line 3, Denise takes on a cooperative role and supplies the English "de-stem" (which Stefano confirms in line 5), showing she shares knowledge of this aspect of wine-making and is aware of language concerning the process, both in English and Italian.

Excerpt 3:

- 1 Stefano we remove the the *raspo*
- 2 Denise uh huh
- 3 Stefano uhm
- 4 Denise sì uh, de-stem
- 5 Stefano yes ok

The speakers also built on common ground created at the event by taking on the role of "animator" to refer to comments or viewpoints expressed earlier by a different convention speaker or to comment on common ground emerging during the interaction, for example wine-making processes. As a result of using these and other discursive strategies, the speakers converge to build "shared worlds and viewpoints", even when local elements are involved (for instance, using the same yeast; using a "cold (dry) room" to dry grapes, called a *fruttaio* in the wineries located in the region of the convention). The highly evaluative language used by the three participants concerns not only specific wines, but also their own activities and their identity as wine producers. For example, positive values emerging from the discourse include the desire to experiment, to learn, to exchange experiences, and to build the positive status of Nebbiolo wines in the world, as shown in Excerpt 4.

Excerpt 4:

- 1 Tom this is beautiful
- 2 Denise uh huh it's
- 3 Stefano ((inaudible speech - he asks them something))
- 4 Denise like *canella* ((translation: cinnamon))
- 5 Stefano *è anche bello confrontarsi*
((translation: it's good too to compare experiences))
- 6 Yesterday, Professor [LN deleted], the last one told that we () need, we don't need Nebbiolo from other countries, but it's good for us to have from other country because it show the value of the grape variety

- 7 Denise it shows value of grape value, absolutely [two units deleted]
- 8 Stefano many people say “I like Nebbiolo” but very few drink Nebbiolo,
so we must do our best to make sure people drink Nebbiolo
- 9 Denise and the quality and the education
- 10 *the cosa più importante è che la persona non solo le persone che comprano e
bevono ma anche chi produce deve sapere come si può fare un Nebbiolo più
buono [...]*
((translation: the most important thing is that the person not only
the people who buy and drink Nebbiolo but also whoever
produces it must know how a better Nebbiolo can be made))

This evaluative status of Nebbiolo as representing a special grape variety and wine is supported by other data such as emails that organizers and invited participants sent to each other prior to the event and made available to the author after the event (Poncini, 2005) and the technical and historical presentations made during the first two days of the event.

Intersecting professional communities

As indicated earlier, the three wine producers introduced above are joined by five Croatians: three journalists, at least one of whom spoke Italian, and a wine producer with an interpreter. Although for technical reasons the transcriptions of this part of the visit are not as complete as those for earlier parts, the use of in-depth field notes while listening to the audio-recording and reviewing transcriptions allow this part of the visit to be described. Indeed, compared to the first part of the visit, interactions taking place with the entire group present in the meeting room are characterized by longer speaking turns, little back-channelling, and longer periods of silence during the wine tasting. These features are in turn related to a nonverbal characteristic of this part of the visit: most of the Croatians took notes during the discussion or at least during Stefano’s replies (although Stefano and/or Denise may have taken occasional notes during the visit, this was not as evident during observations). As a result, Stefano’s speech at times took the form of a short monologue (or at least a longer speaking turn). Moreover this part of the visit was characterized by additional configurations of interaction, such as simultaneous discussions in lower voices. For example, one of the Croatians, the wine producer, was accompanied by a Croatian interpreter who spoke to him in a low voice (not picked up by the recording equipment) during parts of discussions in English. Sometimes Italian was used, since the journalist taking the most active role also spoke

Italian. However, following a specific request by another Croatian participant to speak English, the main language used was English.

The analysis of one extract shows how, in response to a question about yeast by one of the Croatians, Stefano provides information in a longer turn (Poncini, 2007: 303-304). He appears to presuppose shared knowledge about the role of yeast and the issue of the color of Nebbiolo by including expressions such as “you know there are yeast that ...” and “you heard that Nebbiolo does not have color, just ...”. He thus avoids the risk of “offending” or appearing condescending to any participants who already have this knowledge, while at the same time he provides this information to any participants who were previously unaware of it. This pattern contrasts to the way yeast was discussed earlier by the three producers, who engaged in repetition, back-channelling, agreement and evaluation, both implicit and explicit, with the result of highlighting shared knowledge and shared values. The second part of the visit involving a larger group that includes journalists thus takes on a more task-oriented nature.

To sum up, the last part of the visit – the wine tasting and discussion which came to include the Croatian journalists, wine producer and interpreter – appears to be more task-oriented and focused on information provision. Compared to the parts of the visit involving the three wine producers, with the larger group present there is very little back-channelling, overlap and repetition on the part of the interactants. As a result, the main speaker, Stefano, takes longer turns that take the form of short presentations or monologues. In general, less evaluative language is used, and when it is used it concerns the wines tasted. While linguistic choices provide information and help to build shared knowledge, they seem less aimed at building “shared worlds and viewpoints” and more task-oriented.

Professional roles, communities and repertoires

Some of the differences in discourse patterns noted in the data and illustrated above may relate to the professional roles and values of the participants, though national culture and individual style may also influence communication. For example, concerning professional activities in this particular setting, the “younger” wine producers, whether from the U.S. or Italy, seem to share an interest in learning and exchanging experiences and viewpoints about making wine, both technical aspects as well as commercial

and promotional aspects. This interest is closely intertwined with their professional and personal interest in producing wines. The journalists, on the other hand, must report on the event, the wines, and the wineries producing them, and they need to obtain information (and taste wines) to help them meet this goal. The Croatian wine producer, in contrast, seems to seek specific information with his own activity in mind since he does not share information about his own winery and methods with others present. It is conceivable that all participants also aim to build relationships throughout the three-day event to help them further their professional activities and interests.

Whatever the professional role of the participants – wine producers or journalists – they were seen to share repertoires of ways of doing things, for example, verbal and nonverbal practices during the wine tasting. The notion of community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) is of interest for research in such settings because of its emphasis on practices and values (see Bhatia, 2004; Bhatia et al., 2013). In the study, interactants come from different linguistic, cultural and professional backgrounds yet share certain values and practices in connection with the wine industry. While the data is too limited to make generalisations, the present investigation provides evidence of the rich and complex backgrounds that interactants bring to intercultural encounters. Indeed, not only (national) culture and linguistic backgrounds come into play, but also professional roles, goals and values.

The idea that an event-related community possibly emerged during the first convention is based on this and the other studies conducted in connection with the event – see, for instance, Poncini (2004b & 2007) who addresses issues of shared knowledge and representation. Communication before the actual event may have also helped to build a sense of community in relation to the event and its themes; for example, an analysis of email communication between organizers and invited international participants (Poncini, 2005) highlighted the way interactants built up common ground and shared knowledge before the actual convention, in a sense constructing a kind of event-related community. Such a community would seem to share some characteristics with other notions of community, for example discourse community as discussed by Swales (1990), place discourse community (Swales 1998), and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Bhatia et al., 2013). Moreover, it could be viewed as a “Nebbiolo event-related community” even in the presence of overlapping professional communities, for example wine producers, journalists, and other local actors.

Looking at things differently throughout the research process also came to include a greater awareness of the wider social, cultural and economic context: not only the business side of wine and its consumption but also viticulture – the actual growing of grapes – and more generally research, dissemination, the role of local and regional associations, legislation, tradition, innovation and so on. In the wine-producing area of Valtellina, for example, the mountainsides consist of terracing done centuries ago to make more terrain for cultivating grapevines on the slopes, and today the dry stone walls serve the same purpose and also help prevent landslides. Harvesting the grapes is labor intensive, while the terraced slopes and the landscape contribute to the character of the area. The grapes and the wine made from them thus represent connections to wider social, economic, cultural, environmental and political issues. Local issues and the special nature of a grape or wine may be understood and taken for granted by members of a particular community sharing the same knowledge, but these special aspects need to be communicated effectively if they are to be appreciated outside the community as well (Poncini, 2004b & 2007). The analysis of spoken and written texts highlights the different ways shared knowledge is built up with a view to increasing the appreciation of local features.

Outcomes and concluding remarks

The ideas described in the previous section as well as others emerging from research conducted at the first convention were further developed as a result of participation-observation as an invited speaker at the second and third conventions in 2006 and 2009, observations and interviews at smaller related events in 2011-2012, and travel to Australia wine regions in late 2011, where the research focus was on winery visitor centers and data included interviews with winery owners and employees who communicate with visitors. Interestingly, while technical information about wine was also available at many of the wineries visited in South Australia, what stood out was the way the “Visitor Centre” of some wineries also presented materials and exhibits about local culture, history, flora and fauna – aspects other than those strictly related to wines – and the way the “community of wineries” in one wine region displayed an explicitly cooperative approach not only in their promotional materials but also in the way they referred visitors to other wineries in the community.

Focusing specifically on outcomes from the continuation of the research project and participant-observation activities at the third Nebbiolo Grape Convention in 2009, these included more contact with selected participants, with the project moving towards action research and collaboration, including efforts to develop applications and increase relevance to individuals and professional communities involved in the settings under study. At the 2009 convention, the overlapping and intersecting communities observed earlier during the research project were more evident, and in addition they included 25-30 students from a master's program in viticulture and enology at an Italian university. The third convention included a Forum titled "A Style Called Nebbiolo: New Visions for Communicating the Future", which brought together participants with different backgrounds to discuss the wine grape Nebbiolo from various perspectives; speakers included an architect-designer; a (female) producer of Nebbiolo wines from California; an academic-applied linguist (communication and discourse, this author) who had done research on the earlier Nebbiolo conventions; a well-known sociologist from the area; and the head of a locally-based wine-related research foundation. Although it could be said that the first Nebbiolo Grapes Convention held five years earlier had an original, interdisciplinary approach, the title of the special Forum introduced above underlines the organizers' interest in new visions and communication as a theme for the overall event in 2009.

Concerning outcomes on the academic side, interdisciplinary collaboration resulted from contact during the convention with researchers and professors of viticulture, which in turn led to the opportunity to develop a case study examining the different learning settings, especially those outside the classroom, connected to an interuniversity master's program in viticulture and enology. The case study gives attention to the intersecting professional communities characterizing different learning settings and considers related notions such as discursive hybridity and levels of hybridity (Roberts & Sarangi, 1999), with expert-novice roles and communities of practice relevant. Indeed students had opportunities to interact with wine producers, business owners, and representatives of institutions, in many cases using not only the Italian but also the English language to do so. Further interdisciplinary collaboration followed, in particular the development of research communication courses for Ph.D. students in Agriculture, Forestry and Food Sciences at the University of Turin, Italy, in 2010, with further initiatives concerning research communication courses and workshops taking place across disciplines at the University of Milan through 2013.

Just as research connected to Nebbiolo Grapes 2004 brought to light shared practices across professional communities and the notion of an event-related community (for instance, wine tasting, the use of certain discursive strategies to build common ground and exchange expertise), so does later research based in northern Italy underline changes underway, particularly different ways to consider wine: a less “technical” and narrow approach, mirroring the idea behind the Forum “A Style Called Nebbiolo New Visions for Communicating the Future”. Indeed, the less “specialized” approach was observed in late 2010 at a Nebbiolo wine-tasting event in a medium-sized town on Lake Como, where young people had the opportunity to taste Nebbiolo wines in an “unstructured way” in a small bar with live music. In short, less of ritual was displayed, evident when the person serving wine swirled the wine in the wine glass before handing it to some of the patrons, even though swirling, which draws oxygen into the wine, is normally done by whoever is tasting the wine at these events. This more informally structured event was held in conjunction with a more “conventional” wine-tasting held earlier in restaurant and was the result of a conscious choice, as confirmed by the journalist / consultant who organized the 2009 Forum and who was also involved with both of the more recent events (personal communication). The co-existence of different events suggests that the question is not one of choosing between approaches or taking a specialist or “purist” position, but rather finding a way for different approaches to complement each other. “Seeing things differently” in this respect leads back to broader questions regarding changes underway at the global and local level and the role of communities – communities of practice or other kinds of communities – in navigating such changes.

[Paper received 18 October 2012]

[Revised paper accepted 16 February 2013]

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NOTES

¹ Contextual information included in the excerpts indicates when there may have been a question or comment from one of the Croatian participants that was only partially picked up by the recording equipment.

² A community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991: 98, paraphrased in Bhatia 2004: 149) can be viewed “as a set of relations among persons, activities and the world over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice”.

