

'Human life is useless without career!' Do individuals talk about career in the same way as business and parliament?

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Abstract

Findings from an interdisciplinary study using analytical frameworks from the field of applied linguistics suggest that conceptualisations of career currently dominant in business and parliamentary discourse are largely, although not universally, reproduced within individuals' everyday communication. The prominence of these dominant conceptualisations can be revealed through close attention to grammar and word choice, a reflective process enabling Career Development Professionals to comprehend and challenge, if necessary, unproblematised norms produced within a neoliberal social context.

Key words: career development learning; critical discourse analysis; interdisciplinary study; sociolinguistics; corpus linguistics

Introduction

Career development professionals (CDPs) look for ways of unearthing interpretations and expectations of the working world that their clients bring to sessions, to understand how to support their career thinking and actions. Drawing from this experience as a practicing

CDP, the purpose of my research is to examine the extent to which underlying messages that position career in particular ways (Discourses), from respectively the world of commerce and the State, appear in individuals' everyday chat. The study draws on a novel interdisciplinary approach of combining career development theory with analytical tools and principles from applied linguistics. I use language-based methodologies and frameworks to elicit dominant career Discourses from business media and parliamentary texts. This confirms that career is usually positioned as a socially esteemed phenomenon, although legislators additionally class it as an at-risk asset. For a sense of whether such Discourses are reproduced in speech and writing by individuals, I compare my findings with uses of the term 'career' in an online chat forum. Implementing language-based analysis, I notice that institutional career Discourses carry through overall, however, this assessment also shows evidence of some resistance from individuals to the dominant Discourses present in business and parliamentary texts.

The paper summarises the research, sharing some examples for illustrative purposes, along with learning points that contribute to existing studies related to the language dimensions of career development. Offering my research as an addition to ongoing investigations into the interface between social justice and career development practice, I also consider the potential correlation between my findings and neoliberal ideologies at large.

Literature review

It may not necessarily be front-of-mind in the full flow of a career-related interaction, but career development practice is at its core a meta-linguistic process in that CDPs are hearing and reading what their clients say and write, subconsciously (or consciously) analysing those word choices, and endeavouring to extract meaning and surmise the underlying mental models that produced them. Thinking about the words people use when discussing career is an established subject for study in the academic field of career development, with scholars reflecting on how career is represented in written texts or speech. There is not space here to list all reading conducted as part of my research, however it is evident that the career development profession takes a strong interest in language and this is attested by the frequency of articles in the Career Development Institute's official publication *Career Matters* that discuss such aspects as practice nomenclature (Rampling & Storey, 2023), decolonising guidance (Shakoor, 2023), and creating analogies for improved comprehension of career complexity (Howard, 2024).

Some research focuses on the specifics of language, namely how people speak or write about career, the lexicon they deploy, and what this might indicate about how career is positioned. Adamson et al., for example, examine the infiltration of career terminology from academia into 'everyday usage' (1998, p. 252), with Baruch and Vardi subsequently problematising unquestioned positivity towards representations such as 'protean' and 'boundaryless' careers and recommending what they call a more 'realistic discourse' (2016, p. 355). In a review of British print media, Vahidi (2021) discovers reluctance in non-academic communities to adopt terms derived from academia. Bergmo Prvulovic's thesis (2015) explores social representations of career at policy, practice and public levels, through studies that include a qualitative examination of texts and research conducted through group discussions with university students, drawing out mismatched perspectives between those domains. Mowforth probes how Gen-Z students conceptualise career, noting

that phrasing related to career is created through 'everyday social interaction' (2018, p. 30) rather than as a result of university careers service interventions. Moore and Hooley conducted schools-based research assessing the accessibility of 'career vocabulary' (2012) and find confusion about how to talk about career among students and teachers.

Other studies consider the extent to which how career is positioned could be implicated in maintaining 'unequal power relationships' (Gillings et al., 2023, p. 5) leading to benefits for some and disadvantage for others. This ties my line of enquiry into critical discourse analysis (CDA), a branch of applied linguistics that considers critically the role of language in society. Early but still authoritative CDA proponents include Fairclough, (1992), van Dijk, (1993), and Wodak, (2015). The connection between language use and indications of how people see the social world is something that critical discourse analysts have scrutinized in relation to the field of career development. Such perspectives look for a concealed rationale, with Vahidi finding, for example, that 'the notion of career is part of the cultural hegemony which aims to produce false consciousness among people' (2021, p. 158). Others propose that individuals are ignorant of obscured motives such as certain positionings of career being used as a method of maintaining the 'social order' (van Maanen and Barley, 1984, p. 290). Sultana (2022), whose work investigates the hidden power of specific words, has examined language typical within career guidance, identifying links to neoliberalism, and Bergmo Prvulovic (2017) also contemplates alternative meanings of career when the workspace is conditioned by a neoliberal outlook. Fotiadou carried out a corpus-based study of university careers service websites closely inspecting linguistic features to 'denaturalise' (2021, p. 304) commonly used words, finding yet more evidence of neoliberal influence on the provision of career advice.

Published literature indicates that although there is an ongoing scholarly engagement with the importance of considering language use when exploring meaning-making related to career, relatively few career development studies undertake comprehensive analyses of grammatical and word choices within written and spoken texts where 'career' is mentioned. An exception to this relates to the use of metaphor, a linguistic feature that is widely contemplated in career development research. For example, stemming from Inkson's influential work: 'Images of career: nine key metaphors' (2004), Creed et al. (2021), El-Sawad (2011), Smith-Ruig (2008), Mignot (2004), and Horton (2002) evaluate the salience of common career-related metaphors to both student and worker research participants. My project seeks to look more broadly into the affordances of language systems comprising word choice and grammar to draw out deep-seated thinking about career through the linguistic choices made by the speaker/writer.

Method

The study investigates how career is positioned and evaluated within different contexts where talk or writing mentioning 'career' occurs. In this instance, positioning means how people seem to encode meanings (Croft & Cruse, 2004) in uses of the noun 'career', in terms of its social status for example. Evaluation refers to the apparent attitude (Thompson & Hunston, 2000) of the language-user towards career. I adopt a corpus-assisted critical discourse analytical (CCDA) framework, meaning that I use corpora, which are 'searchable collection[s] of texts (written or spoken) stored in electronic form' (Jones, 2022, p. 126) to expose patterns of use, viewing them with a CDA lens to consider what they could

indicate about the social positioning of career. As Gillings et al. note, CCDA can surface 'a compelling account of how discourses solidify through repeated incremental usage' (2023, p. 6). The rationale for adopting a CCDA approach is that it deploys quantitative methodologies to enable the defamiliarisation of apparently typical phrasing related to career to reveal unnoticed Discourses within a societal context.

One of the main benefits of examining a large volume of data as part of this kind of study is that it helps to minimise (although not eliminate) researcher subjectivity (Baker, 2006) and to increase confidence in assertions about the findings, because overall trends emerge from thousands of texts that might not be visible in small-scale purely qualitative investigations. Another aspect of taking this big data approach is that it is possible to detect both dominant Discourses about career *and* resistance to those Discourses that instead refute stereotypical assumptions. Hence, the starting point is a review of the quantitative data first before triangulating my findings through a qualitative analysis that compares potentially hegemonic perspectives found in the business media and parliamentary texts with output from individuals contributing to an online forum.

The comprehensiveness and rigour of the analytical process comes from taking advantage of computerised data processing via a software programme called Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al., 2014) for pattern finding. I focus on word choice and grammatical selections made by speakers and writers when they mention 'career', particularly identifying the grammatical relationship between the noun 'career' and proximal words. Sketch Engine lists the most typical collocates (nearby words) and classifies them as modifiers or verb processes. Grammatically speaking, modifiers are words in a noun phrase which provide additional information, such as adjectives, for example 'stellar career'. Verb processes express different kinds of experiences or actions in language, for example 'ruin a career'. It is expected that surrounding words and grammatical structures in texts in which the word 'career' appears show up underlying connotations because adjectives are often evaluative and a transitive analysis (looking at verb processes and their impact) can indicate how career is being appraised by the language-user.

The term 'discourse' can be understood in two senses, and it is my contention that the distinction is important for CDPs who are interested in the difference between what people *say* about career and what they *think* about it. In the first sense, it is the process through which information about the thing that is being talked about is conveyed; thus 'career discourse' describes situations when topics related to career are being discussed, for example someone's work biography published in a magazine article or a conversation about promotion prospects in a particular industry. In the second sense, 'Discourse' - capitalised in this paper following Gee's (2010) recommendation to distinguish between the two uses - is where speech and writing are seen as a form of 'social practice' (Wodak & Meyer, 2016, p. 6) that both reflects social structures but also constructs them, expressing, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet put it, 'particular sets of ideas' which carry weight in society' (2013, p. 28). In this sense, 'career Discourses' are taken to mean ideologies or beliefs and principles related to how career *should* be thought of in society, conveying, in other words, the dominant view. The popularisation of the 'protean career' concept (Hall, 2002, p. 4), which sees career as self-directed, is an example of this. Van Dijk describes the 'exercise of social power by elites, institutions or groups, that results in social inequality' (1993, pp. 249-250) as being facilitated by Discourses. The critical discursive elements of a CCDA approach keep in mind that power in interaction is often out of balance (Fairclough, 1995,

p. 1), therefore, when this paper mentions career Discourses, it is looking at potential social justice implications. My process nods to Fairclough's three-step analysis (1995). In other words, (1) textual (2) interaction (3) contextual, whereby I use the capabilities of CL to conduct micro analyses of the linguistic features of the text, I review the sources of language data that are being interacted with by readers/audiences and lastly, I theorise about the implications of revealed career Discourses within the overall social context.

Language data

Aligning with Fairclough's second analytical step of interaction, I assessed the most useful source of data to support my research goal. To look for career Discourses from external institutions that might penetrate everyday chat, I chose to examine language data from two sources that are significant forces in society, namely business, (that is, organisations that provide services, sell to us and that employ us, whether private, public or third sector) and parliament, (that is the apparatus of the State that makes our laws and allocates our taxes). The conceptualisations of career that emerge within the speech and writing from business and parliament can be known as institutional career Discourses, and although both producers and recipients of these Discourses may remain unaware of implicit values being conveyed (Deetz and McClellan, 2009), they are not neutral. Organisational communication, for instance, is often motivated by impression management (Forman and Argenti, 2005) and the desire to retain authority over where and how people work (Herriot, 1992) for the purposes of control and/or profitability.

Business corpus: business journalism is identified as a useful language data source because it has a 'close connection to industry' (Wells, 2024, p. 208) and therefore provides broad insights into organisational thinking. My business corpus, named *Buscor*, consists of 5676 UK-originating articles published between 2015-2021 and 4,934,392 words among which 'career' as a noun occurs 8089 times.

Parliamentary corpus: My second source is Hansard (2024), which documents speech in the UK's Houses of Parliament, available via a corpus named *Parlamint2.1* covering 2015-2021. This has 111,980,128 words, including 7299 uses of 'career' as a noun.

Obtaining big datasets of ordinary people talking about topics related to career is not easy, because, although there are increasingly large corpora available, it is problematic to exclude institutional sources and only include texts that have been produced as part of an informal interaction between individuals. Naturalistic language data where people happen to be discussing employment or work more generally is favoured rather than data produced through research surveys about attitudes to career, to eliminate the observer effect (Milroy et al., 1991). As a result, I developed a small corpus of language data from individuals, named *Forumcor*, out of user-generated communication from an open access social networking service, built by collecting posts from question-and-answer website Quora, where individual users from around the world can pose questions and have them answered by other users. Demographic data is not available for the users, so it is not possible to make claims based on age, socioeconomic status, gender, geographic location, ethnic background and so on. For my purposes, I treat *Forumcor* as a discrete dataset that can be used to test the extent to which the Discourses that I observe in the institutional texts are reproduced among this set of language users. Linked to this, I take into consideration that *Forumcor* is significantly smaller than the institutional corpora. This means that

direct comparisons of terminology frequency, for example, are not appropriate. Therefore, this part of the study deploys qualitative analysis, with manual examination and coding of each *Forumcor* text using linguistic labelling from an established theory of language called Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiesen, 2014), to detect presence of institutional career Discourses. On this basis, I necessarily hedge claims about universal applicability of the findings but see this research as providing some hypotheses and a direction of travel to be explored in future study.

Individual corpus: This data set comprises 102 posts where opinions about work, employment and careers appear, constituting 12,698 words and spanning 2014-2022. The study was approved by a University of Nottingham Departmental Ethics Officer. All personal information elements from Quora were deleted before use of the data.

Results

The detailed examination of linguistic features in the texts maps onto Fairclough's first analytical dimension (textual analysis). In reviewing the most typical collocates in the two institutional corpora, a consistent Discourse emerges. Namely, that career is universally positioned as a positively evaluated social resource. Additionally, it is sometimes presented as a vulnerable asset, but this is only prominent within *ParlaMint2.1*.

Direct realisation of positive view of career

An example of the favourable positioning of career is directly realised in the top three most typical evaluative modifiers (adjectives) that co-occur with 'career' in both the business media articles and parliamentary transcripts. Sketch Engine scores the likelihood of 'career' appearing with these adjectives using a LogDice formula whose ratings range from 1 (low strength) to 14 (high strength), with scores above 7 taken to indicate medium to high typicality (Rychlý, 2008). *Successful*, *distinguished* and *rewarding* are expressions of positive appreciation indicating an approving attitude. Their LogDice scores in both corpora range from 8.5 to 10.4 so are considered to be strongly typical combinations.

A random sample of concordances (line extracts showing the key word + identified collocates) is generated by Sketch Engine, a selection of which appear in the following tables, chosen by me as illustrative of the patterns found in the overall data. In Table 1, concordances (1) and (2) illustrate how careers are objects of either pride or desire, and something to be aspired to. Presenting career as an entity that can be *distinguished* bespeaks attribution of high honour and in (3) this links to knowledge and power. Career is regularly described as being *rewarding* which in (4) connects with the intellectual satisfaction claimed to result from working in science and technology sectors. Another undertone could be economic, hinting that superior levels of financial compensation await those who take this step. In (5) however, there is an indication that satisfaction can come at a personal cost; in this case some of the desirability of career is mitigated.

Table 1. Sample lines from corpora – modifiers that position career as an esteemed social resource

#	Concordance	Corpus name
1	Before becoming an entrepreneur, I had a successful career in retail sales and as an attorney	Buscor
2	We as individuals have a real responsibility to encourage ambition and make sure that there are few roadblocks to a successful career	ParlaMint2.1
3	the advice of those whose long and distinguished careers confer on them unparalleled authority	ParlaMint2.1
4	A career in STEM can be hugely rewarding and stimulating	Buscor
5	My Lords, social work can be a very rewarding career but it can also be very stressful	ParlaMint2.1

Another example of expressions of enthusiasm towards career is seen within the most typical verb processes involving the noun 'career', which is depicted as a phenomenon that people *enjoy* (LogDice score 8.1). In line (6) (Table 2), A's happiness in their career is partially explained by it being *stellar*, in other words, metaphorically heavenly. The subtext in (7) is that the army is capable of generating contentment in serving women if conditions are improved.

Table 2: Sample lines from corpora - verb processes that position career as an esteemed social resource – direct realisation

#	Concordance	Corpus name
6	Ultimately, A's abrupt departure was unusual for a banker who had enjoyed a stellar career with the firm, and had stuck with it through several strategic iterations	Buscor
7	That flexibility should be particularly helpful in assisting women to enjoy full careers in the armed forces over a period of time, while reducing concerns female recruits may have	ParlaMint2.1

Indirect realisation of positive view of career

Positive evaluation of career is also realised indirectly (Table 3). For example, positivity is evoked through the metaphor where career is likened to a path, in *advance* (LogDice score 8.3) and *progress* (LogDice score 7.7), on the basis that formative embodied experiences teach us that forward motion is advantageous, (Atanasova, 2018, Charteris-Black, 2011, Hedblom et al., 2015, Mandler & Pagán Cánovas, 2014). This metaphor also suggests unidirectionality, implying a continuous, uninterrupted process. In (8), *advance* is seen as movement towards achievement of business entrepreneurship and in (9), *progress* of careers equates with metaphorical construction of a network of like-minded contacts. Both post-motion destinations are presupposed to be beneficial and part of ongoing journeys featuring positive outcomes.

Table 3: Sample lines from corpora - verb processes that position career as an esteemed social resource – indirect realisation

#	Concordance	Corpus name
8	We have been educating and helping individuals start or advance their careers and establish drug testing businesses for the past five years and are excited to be able to provide quality testing	Buscor
9	They should be able to progress their careers at the hospital and to build a community around their working	ParlaMint2.1

Suggestion that career is a vulnerable social asset

There are signs that career is viewed as a resource-at-risk in ParlaMint2.1. *Ruin + career* (LogDice score 7.8) occurs often enough to be worthy of attention, especially as such collocations do not appear in the most typical lists for *Buscor*. In (10) (Table 4), not only is career positioned as a social resource that can be permanently devastated, but this eventuality could blight the prospects of *this generation of children*, a sizeable ramification for the population. (11) prompts a mental model of something shattered beyond repair. The proximity of other adjectives such as *broken* and *wrecked* reinforces imagery of someone's life being demolished. This contributes to a sense that career has a rare value and once lost, it may be gone forever. Notably, the finality of *ruin + career* contradicts the continuous path metaphor because it brings the journey to a permanent halt.

Table 4: Sample lines from corpora showing verb processes that position career as a resource-at-risk – direct realisation

#	Concordance	Corpus name
10	in which case, we would not be possibly ruining the potential future careers of this generation of children	ParlaMint2.1
11	Seventeen years of investigation have broken this decorated soldier, ruined his career and wrecked his mental health	ParlaMint2.1

Comparing *Forumcor* with the institutional corpora

The second part of the analysis assesses the extent to which positive positioning and evaluations of career are reproduced in online posts that form *Forumcor*. Data were tagged as either reproducing, adapting or resisting career Discourses identified in the institutional corpora. (A neutral tag was allocated in indeterminate cases.) Almost 51% of posts overtly reinforce the institutional stances on career overall. Nearly a quarter (23.5%) of the total number of posts adapt aspects of the business media and parliamentary positions on career and 7.8% demonstrate resistance to institutional career Discourses.

Space does not allow integration of a full dataset into this paper, therefore, with acknowledgement of the potential for researcher subjectivity, the following examples have been selected as illustrative of posts where career Discourses are reproduced, adapted or resisted, visible through grammatical and word choices.

Table 5 displays extracts from posts that concur with institutional Discourses on the attractive benefits of career. Assertions include that it *enhances personal and social stature* (12), a verbal process that denotes the improving capacity of 'career', as well as being *much needed* (13), an evaluation that presents 'career' through the modulation of obligation in grammatical terms, demonstrating adherence to assessment of career as a worthwhile and indispensable social resource. Writing that existence is *useless without career* in extract (14), grammatically expresses a judgmental modality, and through this projects a belief that career constitutes the very essence of life, arguing that without it there is futility. The path metaphor seen in the institutional corpora is mirrored in *progress* (15), capturing similar connotations of the satisfaction of forward motion.

Although much of *Forumcor* presents career as worthwhile, this does not preclude some commentary that it is a precarious asset. 14.7% of posts are coded as indicating that career is considered a resource-at-risk in line with elements of *Parlamint2.1*. An example that endorses the high value of career while seeing it as vulnerable is seen in (15) (Table 5). The hyperbole of *devastated*, semantically related to *ruin* observed in *Parlamint2.1* (Table 4), is a potent reaction to its loss, accentuating the consequences for individuals of career susceptibility. The reproduction within (15) of a Discourse of risk around 'career' demonstrates the powerful influence of institutional discourse on everyday chat, establishing normed dimensions of career, (in this case its overall positioning as a positive social resource), that are not expected to be widely challenged.

Table 5: Sample post extracts showing reproduced institutional career Discourses that position career as an esteemed social resource

#	Sample extract	Corpus name
12	There is no exact definition of Career. However, according to me Career is your professional pursuit which enhances your personal and social stature in all the respects	Forumcor
13	A career is an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person's life and with opportunities for progress. It is important to come up with your career planning as it gives you the much needed direction and makes it clear where you see yourself in future. It makes you aware of your strength and weaknesses and the skills and knowledge that are required to achieve your goals in future.	Forumcor
14	Human life is useless without career. We can say that its incomplete if one is not dedicated to his/her career	Forumcor
15	My work is my job, my career is my life. My job is an enjoyable part of my life, however, the job supplements my life by providing funds and experience. If I lose a job, there is another waiting. If I were to lose my career, I would be devastated. This has happened twice, I picked up and went on	Forumcor

Celebrations of career across much of *Forumcor* are moderated in some posts in general terms (16) (Table 6) where using negation undermines the positivity of career, and specifically through assertions that career can take an unreasonable toll on individuals. For example, costs to wellbeing are visible in evaluative commentary that career is *stressful* (17), conditions that can bring people to a standstill, mirroring alternative messaging seen in *Parlamint2.1* (Table 1 (5)).

Table 6: Sample post extracts that position career as less than optimal

#	Sample extract	Corpus name
16	Not all careers are great	Forumcor
17	On another note you will think this career is so stressful and you can't continue	Forumcor

A small proportion of posts in *Forumcor* demonstrate explicit resistance to institutional career Discourses; posts may openly disapprove of career or question its existence. For example (Table 7), readers are warned that career is habitually misrepresented, duping the public: *tricked* (18), *hoodwink* and *fooled* (19) – lexical choices that metaphorically connect career to manipulative sorcery. This ties in with implications that vested interests – *elitist* (20) and *psychopath* (19) both evaluative noun selections – are deriving benefits from Discourse acceptance. Several Discourse-resistant posts take a meta-linguistic stance, classifying career as a social fabrication, a concept that exists in jargon form only, merely a re-branding of working life – a *buzz word* (20). Career is defined as being manufactured – a *construct* and *artifact* (21), with the suggestion that it serves requirements for collective productivity (rather than meeting individuals' needs). These constitute broadly negative judgements of career by posters whose texts confront Discourses in the institutional corpora, as well as much of *Forumcor*, that project career as an unadulterated social good.

Table 7: Sample post extracts showing resistance to institutional career Discourses

#	Sample extract	Corpus name
18	Sometimes career is a choice but other times it's a sacrifice of your life to survive the same. [...] you might get tricked and spend a lifetime doing something	Forumcor
19	That concept is the worst creation of a psychopath to hoodwink the Gullible [...] Even a dead-end job may turn into a career or point you to one that other people call career, but don't be fooled by it. [...] Do it until it promotes your well being, when that is not a valid conclusion, then move on	Forumcor
20	career is a buzz word of elitist	Forumcor
21	Career is a construct – it is one more artifact to boost motivation, in a society driven by objectives	Forumcor

Concluding discussion

As previously mentioned, I see my findings as complementing and building on academic literature within career development that is informed by social justice values. Hooley et al., (2017) and Bergmo-Prvulovic, (2017) have speculated, as I do, on the adverse impact of neoliberalism to equitable and inclusive career development. Related to my study's focus on evidence that individual's absorb institutional career Discourses, I also see parallels with the work of Richardson, who relates how 'career discourse practices [...] permeate and deeply affect [people's] experience in relation to work' (2012, p. 89). By comparing the language of ordinary online users with that of business and parliament, I explore similar ground to Bergmo-Prvulovic, who observes the 'conflicting perspectives of 'career'', between organisations, CDPs and individuals (2017: abstract). The findings also endorse challenges made by Baruch and Vardi to produce career Discourses that are 'more grounded in reality' (2016, p. 355) in a bid to find an equilibrium between benign and malign elements. In choosing a CCDA approach, I have worked with methodologies also adopted by Fotiadou (2021), who examines linguistic patterns in order to understand the effect of the word 'employability' found in higher education websites on students.

As a novel contribution to existing scholarship, this paper seeks to inspire CDPs who are motivated to engage with issues of social justice by providing empirical *linguistic* evidence of dominant career Discourses and how they are produced and disseminated through lexico-grammatical choices, which, to my knowledge, has not been done exactly in this way before.

Representing career as a positive social resource

In my research, in line with Fairclough's third analytical step, the political and economic ideology of neoliberalism provides social context for the data examined. In particular, its adherence to 'happiness as enterprise' (Binkley, 2014, p. 3), which is about overcoming all feelings of negativity in the service of individual success, supplies a paradigm for considering the research outcomes.

In contemplating motivations for production of dominant career Discourses, focus is given to relations of power, in other words, who might benefit from certain positionings of career. Construing career as an experience that produces felicity (*enjoy + career* (Table 2)) and is personally fruitful (*rewarding + career* (Table 1)) makes it an appealing prospect. This ties in with Young and Collin's remark: 'the message [...] that careers are normal and desirable has been a strong one' (2000, p. 3). Projecting career in almost exclusively upbeat terms aligns with the 'political uses of happiness' (Duncan, 2007, p. 85), where assumed entitlement to pleasure is used to pitch societal systems that give advantage to some but not all. Grammatically positioning career as a goal that can be pushed through time and space (*progress and advance + career* (Table 3)) is consistent with the notion of moving forward and 'future-orientedness' (Marissa, 2021, p. 582); striving ahead is seen to be propitious and likely to lead to ongoing contentment, coinciding with the neoliberal value of aiming for perpetual motion (Rosa et al., 2016).

Benefits can ensue from reproducing a general belief in career as a good thing. Incentivising populations to aspire towards versions of career that are defined by societal institutions diverts attention from alternative work systems potentially founded on greater

egalitarianism and distributed power, effectively rigging career as a tool of social control (Wilensky, 1961). From this angle, the enticement to keep workers' attention on developing career in the form in which it is offered maintains authority in the hands of those with the power to determine the employment landscape.

Inducement of fear is implicated in the career-at-risk Discourse that emerges in *Parlamint2.1*. Panic encourages compliancy and an instinct for self-preservation (Lemke et al., 2011), rather than questioning whether societal anxieties have been manufactured. This links to the gratification principle in neoliberal societies where 'forms of desire and pleasure [...] are intimately wedded to fear' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, p. 323) to maintain the cycle of consumption. Hence, career is both dangled as something to wish for and something that can be taken away. Employment legislation, work-related policy and other actions taken by government may therefore be presented as defensible on the basis that citizens need to rely on those in command to protect access to a valued social resource.

Within the small corpus of casual career discourse among individuals, there is overall adherence to positive evaluations of career that are prominent within the institutional corpora. Therefore, for users of *Forumcor* at least, the presupposition that both overt and covert messaging from business and the State is highly influential seems justified. While not all comments are as forthright as the assertion *Human life is useless without career* ((14) Table 5), relatively few disagree with the sentiment that career is something to aspire to. On the other hand, resistance to dominant Discourses identified in *Forumcor* confirms that people are open to contesting the accuracy of institutional positionings of career. The relatively small amount of verbal defiance against an assumed truth, however, reinforces recommendations that 'career conceptualization and research [...] be less normatively biased and prescriptive' (Baruch & Vardi, 2016, p. 355), a steer from academia to help equip individuals to navigate both hope and disappointment.

Implications for career development professional learning and practice

Noting that workplace education focused on the specifics of language 'is often underrated' (Mautner, 2016, p. 9), there are opportunities to give curricular space to the convergence of career development and critically informed applied linguistics theoretical approaches within CDP professional learning programmes. As well as linguistic frameworks for conversation analysis that can accelerate training CDPs' effectiveness in comprehending client perspectives, there is benefit in further equipping practitioners in understanding how the 'social reality of work' (Chalupnik, 2024, p. 13) is moulded by language – including how people are recruited, how leadership is enacted and how day-to-day work happens. CDA recognises that 'reality shapes discourse, and discourse shapes reality' (Mautner, 2016, p. 11) and close linguistic analysis provides a vehicle for bringing this to light. In-depth knowledge of the contemporary workplace can be acquired through detailed language reviews of organisations' external presentation; as the findings of this study show, word and grammar choice are central to how surface level *and* underlying meaning-making occur. Following my research experience, I would encourage CDP trainers to promote students' exploitation of linguistic tools to analyse socially influential texts. Useful insights are gained by interrogating naturalised ways of speaking about career to identify different linguistic features through which language sustains power relations within career discourse, such as a normalised valorisation of aspiration for career that neglects to address whether it is universally accessible.

Returning to the CCDA framework that underpins my research process, I would argue that the findings of the study endorse CDPs' instincts for contesting taken-for-granted career Discourses, especially when dominant conceptions may disserve clients (Coupland, 2004). They validate career guidance models and practices through which clients are empowered to question normed assumptions, that, for example, there are no downsides to career, a Discourse that by countering their lived experiences could lead to confusion or unfounded self-blame. The findings suggest that while people have the potential to discern unrealistic positioning of career, there is a role for CDPs in supporting them with informed scrutiny, encouraging enquiry, and to avoid, as Richardson states, 'discourse practices of vocational psychology [that] mask the reproduction of structures of inequality and power' (2012, p. 92). The affordances of CCDA methodologies align with and provide additional layers for existing theoretical models such as the systems theory framework of career development proposed by McMahon and Patton (2020) that highlights the salience of context in the experience of career.

The value of using a big data approach with the assistance of corpus linguistics analytical tools is that it moves research towards greater levels of objectivity, increasing confidence in the results because of the volume and variety of data. As technology for carrying out quantitative research becomes more accessible, CDPs can engage in professional investigations without necessarily doing so from within university establishments.

Examining linguistic features using recognised accounts of grammar such as Systemic Functional Linguistics, is a process that CDPs can adopt to authenticate intuitive hunches about what is going on during an interaction or in other career discourse. The introduction of linguistic labelling lends credence when CDPs, during communication with stakeholders, expose evidence of evaluative phrasing and exclusively positive images of career that are presented as fact rather than opinion. A practical example would be to apply linguistic literacy to helping clients understand how job descriptions frame idealised candidates and anticipate presentation of 'an acceptable identity' (Campbell & Roberts, 2007, p. 244) through written and spoken word/grammar choices, a process that marginalises those who have not been linguistically trained to interpret subtext.

From a personal point of view, this research has refreshed my commitment to (1) acknowledging inherent complexities in the terminology of my trade, (2) questioning tacit interpretations, (3) endeavouring to widen career's semantic scope and balance positivity bias (Baruch et al, 2015) while confronting unwarranted anxiety creation. Future ethnographic study would offer the opportunity to apply linguistics tools to longer stretches of text, such as transcripts from career conversations, for more qualitative insights.



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