Editorial
Research Themes
in Bioethically-relevant Discourse:
An Overview

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The dissemination of knowledge about sensitive bioethical issues lies at the intersection between scientific discourse (e.g. medicine, biotechnology, genetics, environmental sciences) and other kinds of specialised (legal, economic, political, religious) discourse. The high political profile of the bioethical debate, its impact on individuals' and communities' lives, and its relevance for civil rights and for our relationship with the environment call for an in-depth examination of the transformations undergone by bioethically-relevant knowledge in the dissemination process and identify alterations and forms of ideological manipulation.

Employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, the papers in this issue examine (bio)ethical themes in texts produced within the domains of medicine, genetics and biotechnology and their representation across cultures and over time. They also address some of the transformations undergone by sensitive knowledge in the dissemination process, touching upon interdiscursivity and genre hybridization in communication about bioethical issues in traditional and in the new media, where no communication dealing with bioethics can ever be purely non-ideological, and it reflects a "socio-cultural value system that was limited rather than universal" (Koch 2006, 264).

Bioethics, by definition, concerns life and, in particular, some of the most critical moments in human existence such as conception, birth, illness, ageing and death. Giuliana Garzone's contribution opens the issue precisely discussing sensitive ethical challenges posed by Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART). Due to their rapid evolution, "ART legisla-

tion is often unable to keep pace and address all of the ethical and legal issues that are constantly emerging in the field" (Brezina and Zhao 2012, 5). She pays specific attention to the re-elaboration and presentation of scientific knowledge in legal discourse, as concerns, expressly, terminological definitions in English-speaking countries. Legal definitions in normative texts emerge as central in the creation of discourses that acquire meaning in the social and communicative contexts within which they are set.

New and old medical and healthcare technologies – more or less scientifically viable – have changed the contemporary public's understanding of the science that lies behind it, which tends at times to be ignored in favour of the more visible effects that such technology has on our lives. In fact, "the technology as tool view is only part of the story about the complex relationships between technology, society, and ethics. The reason for this is that technologies, in addition to being means to ends, are also complex social phenomena" (Sandler 2014, 2). Science as a social phenomenon is addressed by Davide Mazzi, who outlines the ethical preoccupations raised by public health communication concerning nutrition, in his analysis of the debate on the Ketogenic Diet as conducted by health institutions, charities and the press from the UK and Ireland. The discourse emerges as different in the two countries, and the role of argumentation appears fundamental in how it is differently shaped.

As we live in an era in which DNA-testing is easily available to most people living in developed countries, Sergio Pizziconi, Walter Giordano, Laura Di Ferrante report on the linguistic practice of genetic bragging as a speech act with economic and social entailments. They reflect on the ethical implications of (ab)using such sensitive data for commercial (e.g. as in insurance policies) and political purposes, analysing texts covering different spatial, chronological and modal spans.

Speaking of non-viable technology, Alessandra Vicentini proposes a review of a controversial case that shook the Italian scientific community: the Stamina therapy supposedly aimed at curing chronic neurodegenerative diseases. Moving from sociological models of science communication, argumentation theory and science popularisation, she investigates how scientists, political and health institutions, the media, patients and the public interact when faced with (pseudo)scientific news that may raise relevant ethical concerns from a public health perspective.

With Sylvain Dieltjens and Priscilla Heynderickx, we turn to a different stage in human existence: the end of life. The authors provide a linguistic analysis of trust in palliative care encounters between doctors and terminal patients. Just like "research into what such talk looks like

linguistically can provide material for ACP [Advance Care Planning] protocols and procedures that build organically on language choices that people feel comfortable with" (Modan and Brill 2014, 154), so studies into the ethics of physician-patient communication can prove fundamental in assisting patients and their families in taking medical decisions regarding their health, making the contribution that discourse analysis can provide to orienting policymakers, scholars, scientists and the public ever more significant.

Nearing the end of their life, yet not necessarily in a critical condition, the last chapter by Kim Grego deals with ageing people, and with the ethical risk inherent in the communication aimed at this socially fragile group, especially on the web. Drawing from research in sociolinguistics, marketing and social studies, she proposes a grid for the linguistic analysis of texts aimed at seniors that moves from a definition of old age based on self-perception to a "different way of categorising people, one perhaps more closely reflecting reality, [...] in terms of their health and cognitive functioning" (Mordini *et al.* 2009, 208). Within this cognitive view of age, the idea of seniors' vulnerability is also reshaped and developed into a suggestion for a linguistic approach to the increasingly negotiable notion of (old) age.

Altogether, the contributions presented in this issue draw a picture of the growing ethical concerns of a fast-changing global society, where technology is not only developing at a previously unseen speed, but it is also widely been made known and available to the man in the street. Whether this process of science popularisation and democratisation of technology will have more positive or more negative repercussions on society in the medium and long term remains to be seen. What is certain is that a "purely procedural ethics inscribed within an unquestioned teleology of biotechnological progress shields from critical view the trajectory of scientific development" (Hall 2006, 286). The applied linguist – and the (critical) discourse analyst especially – is engaged precisely in promoting and providing such critical views, by offering reflections on the uses and applications of language in society that can hopefully prove of interest to the academic, the policymaker and the public at large.

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