



## Expertise revisited, Part I—Interactional expertise



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### ABSTRACT

In Part I of this two part paper we try to set out the ‘essence’ of the notion of interactional expertise by starting with its origins. In Part II we will look at the notion of contributory expertise. The exercise has been triggered by recent discussion of these concepts in this journal by Plaisance and Kennedy and by Goddixsen.

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### 1. Introduction: four streams of interactional expertise

Concepts that are widely taken up will be developed and adapted by others, the authors’ only privilege being special access to the origins of the ideas.<sup>1</sup> Triggered by some recent critiques and suggested modifications, in ‘Part I’ of this paper we try to set out the deep meaning of interactional expertise in so far as it can be distilled from its origins pointing out that the central idea is the separation of language and practice which, to give it fresh salience, we will call the ‘separation principle’. In ‘Part II’ we will look at what it means to make contributions to specialist debates. Along the way we will introduce other new ideas including ‘ubiquitous interactional expertise’ and we will split the idea of referred expertise into two parts and also point to the meta-expertise element of interactional and contributory expertise.

Memory is unreliable so for the purpose of tracing origins we used a special utility (‘astrogrep’) to explore old computer archives, reminding ourselves of much that we had forgotten and coming up

with a number of surprises. Thus, in many talks we have been describing the origins of the idea of interactional expertise as solely to do with fieldwork experience in the late 1990s but, though the fieldwork was the origin of the term ‘interactional expertise’, the idea goes back further to debates about artificial intelligence and the sociology of knowledge. We conclude that four channels feed the idea of interactional expertise, as shown in Fig. 1. The backbone of the concept is a philosophical stream; this is shown in black with the first invocation of the idea being the second entry, dated 1995/6 and labelled as the separation principle. A 2004 article (Collins, 2004b) in a philosophy journal unites the philosophy stream with an ‘imitation game tributary’ and a ‘fieldwork tributary’. There is also a ‘sociology and policy’ channel which, on pain of some convoluted hydraulics, is mostly downstream from the others in a sideways kind of way.

After explaining the four-channel model of interactional expertise (sometimes referred to below as IE), we are going to suggest that certain critiques and proposed amendments are in danger of creating an ‘interactional expertise lite’ which would have very wide application but would lose sight of the force that drove the concept’s development. ‘Lite’ terms are popular because they give the impression of resolving deep philosophical problems without the usual detailed work; instead mere use of the term is taken to be enough. Thus the invocation of ‘actor network theory’ in its lite incarnation allows social, political and material factors to be

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<sup>1</sup> The papers and books introducing the concept of interactional expertise and other related expertises have been cited more than 2,300 times and a Google search for ‘interactional expertise’ reveals very wide discussion of the idea.

Winch 1958 Wittgenstein 1953 The sociological interpretation of Wittgenstein 1974 1975 ...			
IMITATION GAME	PHILOSOPHY	FIELDWORK	SOCIOLOGY POLICY
<b>1990</b> <i>Artificial Experts</i> Pre-IE experiments  <b>2004</b> Colour blind, perfect pitch experiments begin	<b>1995 1996</b> <b>SEPARATION PRINCIPLE</b> Separate language and practice Embodiment	<b>1997 2002</b> <i>The term</i> 'interactional expertise'  <b>2002 2004</b> <i>Gravity's Shadow</i>	Epstein Sheep farmers  Imagined problem of GW and power lines! Managers  Peer reviewers  Committees  Sports coaches etc  <b>2007</b> Crossing linguistic divides  <b>2011</b> Special IE Division of Labour  <b>2014</b> Ubiquitous IE Social 'glue'  <b>2014</b> The Owls
2003? 2004 THE SYNTHESIS			
<b>2005</b> Collins as GW physicist  <b>2007</b> The blind  <b>2007</b> Classroom Experiments on Gays etc  <b>2011</b> Large Scale Experiments begin	<b>2006 2007</b> Strong Interactional Hypothesis	<b>2013</b> <i>Gravity's Ghost and Big Dog</i>	

Fig. 1. Evolution of idea of interactional expertise (dates of publications in italics).

combined in whichever way the analyst prefers without worrying about which has causal priority in the real world, what the methodology is for establishing such things, or the theory's underlying

and strange metaphysics of agency; the term 'trading zone' can be used in a lite way to resolve anxieties about the difficulty of communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries without looking deeply into the detail of how such things work; and the same often goes for the term 'boundary object', which is invoked to 'explain' how different communities collaborate despite different interests and objectives.<sup>2</sup> Even though it might widen its appeal still further, we think it could be prejudicial to the notion of expertise in general if the term 'interactional expertise' comes to be used to licence contributions to technical debates without the grounds of the expertise being established independently of the mere invocation of the term.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'Latour Lite', whose origin is unknown (Collins thought Shapin invented it but he denies it), refers to the many purported uses of the work of Bruno Latour which do not get the heart of his position nor its implications. Latour (private communication with Collins, 1/09/2011) acknowledges the problem but says it is not his fault. For critiques of Actor Network Theory which are germane to the problem, see Collins & Yearley (1992) and Collins (2012). For an analysis which gives 'trading zones' and 'boundary objects' places in a more detailed scheme of cross-language communication see Collins et al. (2007).

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