
A STAR PLENARY PERFORMANCE

The Guardian's theatre critic reviews a plenary lecture at a linguistics conference.

The poster presentations and parallel warm-up seminars had not prepared the audience for this star turn.

The speaker appeared carrying a slim grey laptop, plugged it in (it worked first time) behind a simple, almost minimalist, lectern in light-coloured wood, asymmetrically positioned in front of a single white screen, and we were off. Any show is best when least cluttered, and the first projected image set the tone: classic PowerPoint Times New Roman, black on white (and large enough for those at the back to read).

What began in low-key fashion, then turned into an enjoyable drama. It sent the audience roaming through a brightly lit space, spinning through concentric circles of individual examples (with an occasional surprise ill-formed sequence), whole texts and huge text collections. They were made to tip-toe through little phrases, ramble through long sentences contextualized in narratives, and finally stumble down into enormous data-mines from which nuggets were extracted.

It was clearly the intriguing intention of the author (who also choreographed) to blur the border between illusion and reality. What we see is not quite what is really there: a compelling example of how to turn real life events into compelling linguistics by making generalizations without sacrificing truth. The gently paced narrative only occasionally lost focus (as the speaker defined technical terms), and what it lacked in social analysis it seemed determined to make up for in historical allusion: even if he never appeared, Firth was a constant presence in these dramatic fragments.

Traditionally these events are one-offs, but this one deserves to tour for eternity. The later published version always lacks the feel of the face-to-face encounter: the supporting cast of walk-on extras, who provide those little moments, either humorous (the speaker's doctoral student comes in late), or embarrassing (an eminent participant, keen to display superior knowledge, asks a question which shows he hasn't understood a word).

Judging by the packed performance I attended, there's a demand for such events which depend on the words, as medium and message. Did you catch this show – or any other recently? Tell us about it using #Iwasthere