Chapter Four

Methodology
4.2 An Etymology of Tacit Knowledge

Tacit is from the Latin tacitus meaning silent. In common usage, most of the words which are synonyms of tacit relate to ineffability, for example, these include unsaid, unspoken, unuttered, wordless, silent, undeclared, unexpressed and unvoiced. They are also related to indirectness, for example, implicit, implied, inferred, and understood [70].

Tacit typically have a strong tendency to occur side-by-side with agreement, approval and knowledge. As a qualifier of knowledge in the concept, tacit knowledge, the term carries these associations of the unspeakable and oblique. The occurrence involves ideas of both what it means for something to be silent in a linguistic sense, and what it means ‘to know silently’. Studies typically focus solely on the latter component. This thesis attempts to address this bias by considering tacit knowledge in terms of what it means to the expert and provides a possible framework to address the question of whether tacit knowledge is ineffable.

4.3 What does it mean?

The researcher attributed with coining the term tacit knowledge in contemporary times is Michael Polanyi. His Theory of Tacit Knowing (TTK) introduces a post-critical perspective on what it means to know, using the domain of science as an example with which to critique the tenets of logical positivism. The theory is post-critical in the sense that Polanyi argues that belief precedes and characterizes knowledge. However, rather than a thesis on tacit knowledge, TTK introduces another term entirely: tacit knowing.
As such, it theorizes a process rather than an object. This conceptual position is in accord with the movement in disciplines that theorize meaning, such as semiotics and linguistics, way from a constituency-based view of knowledge as an object, towards a view of knowledge as dynamically constructed, as, in effect, 'in the making'. The present thesis adopts this kind of perspective but seeks to extend Polanyi's theory to incorporate the possibility that tacit knowing is not as silent as we have assumed.

While analysis of Polanyi's theory has focused on what a tacit form of knowing might constitute, it is also important to consider what it means 'to tell' in the context of such knowing. If telling means making explicit, codified artifacts that are directly 'transferred' to the mind of the listener, then this kind of telling is not a possible means of exposing tacit knowledge. This conceptualization would be following a constituency-based model of language, mentioned in the previous section, and neglecting, amongst other things, the interpersonal component of spoken discourse.

However, if we allow that articulating involves processes of which the expert is not necessarily aware and which are in turn subject to both unconscious and conscious interpretation by the consumer of the knowledge, proper articulation is reinstated as relevant to understanding tacit knowledge. This thesis derives from existing frameworks and models ideas that are available, to formulate a new common framework and to analyze, whether the captured knowledge is usable or not.