Abstract

Meetings are integral to the business world and to the literature on workplace interaction. However, the business meeting has often been treated as a data source for research on workplace interaction, rather than a research topic in its own right. This thesis contributes to research on meetings by examining the sequential structure of talk in business meetings and the transition between non-meeting talk and meeting talk. In particular, pre-meeting small talk, as an instantiation of non-meeting talk, as well as opening/closing sequences, as examples of meeting talk, are chosen as particular areas for close examination in this thesis. In addition, the current research compares business meetings in two different organisations, one in Hong Kong and one in New Zealand, exploring cultural influences on the practices of business meetings.

The two organisations from which the data was collected are a paint company in Hong Kong and an information technology company in New Zealand. The data set comprises audio and video recordings of eleven regular management meetings in the two companies (five in the former and six in the latter), complemented by ethnographic information, interviews with the participants, and a questionnaire about organisational culture. The meetings and the interviews were conducted in the participants' native languages, i.e. Cantonese and English. The researcher is bilingual, a speaker of both languages.

This study uses three theoretical frameworks to analyse meeting discourse at different levels: namely, conversation analysis (CA), social constructionism (SC), and the community of practice (CofP) framework. In particular, CA is used to analyse the sequential structure of meeting openings and closings, while SC and CofP enable the researcher to take account of the wider and the local contexts in which an interaction takes place.

The thesis examines and compares the national and organisational cultures within which the meeting discourse is embedded. For this purpose, information collected from a workplace cultural survey, workplace observations, and interviews was analysed. The findings suggest that both companies emphasise professionalism and employees' well-being, but the degree of emphasis and the

precise manifestations of each value differ in each workplace. The Hong Kong company places greater emphasis on professionalism and shows its concerns for the employees by providing support in advancing their competence, whilst the New Zealand company places relatively more emphasis on employees' comfort and enjoyment by establishing an informal and relaxed working atmosphere and organising many social activities. These results indicated that the culture of each company was consistent with their respective national cultures as represented in the literature.

An analysis of meeting discourse indicated that pre-meeting small talk and meeting openings/closings were similar in some respects and different in others in the two companies. In particular, the content, the distribution and features of turn-taking features in the pre-meeting small talk were very similar in the Hong Kong and the New Zealand meetings, but in the Hong Kong meetings, the length of pauses between topics tended to be longer and instances of small talk tended to occur after work-related topics (as opposed to the reverse order in New Zealand meetings). The meeting openings and closings were reasonably similar in terms of sequential structure but rather different in terms of formality. Openings and closings in the Hong Kong meetings were relatively longer and more formal than those in the New Zealand company.

It is argued that similarities between the two sets of meetings are due to common characteristics in the ritual nature of business meetings, while differences result from the influence of the national and organisational cultures on the meeting participants. Finally, however, it is important to note that the dynamic nature of interaction means that the ways in which aspects of the national and organisational cultures influence the meeting participants are constantly negotiated between meeting participants.