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Victoria University of Wellington's Language in the Workplace Project: An overview

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Language in the Workplace Occasional Papers

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This series of occasional papers is aimed at providing a wide range of information about the way language is used in the New Zealand workplace. The first paper outlines the aims and scope of the core project, the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project, and describes the approach adopted by the project team in collecting and analysing workplace data. Subsequent papers provide more detailed analyses of particular aspects of workplace interaction.

These include

- **a description of the methodology adopted to collect workplace interaction, and its developments and adaptations to the very different demands of disparate workplaces**
- **an analysis of varied ways people get things done at work, or the forms which directives take in different New Zealand workplaces**
- **an exploration of the functions of humour in workplace interaction**
- **an analysis of the structure of formal meetings in relation to the way decisions are reached**
- **a discussion of the concept of the "gendered" workplace and its relevance in New Zealand workplaces**
- **an examination of the varied literature on the role of e-mail at work**
- **an analysis of changes in some features of sexist language in workplace documents**

The series is available in full text at this website: http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp

The Research team includes Professor Janet Holmes (Director), Maria Stubbe (Research Fellow), Bernadette Vine (Senior Research Officer), Meredith Marra (Research Officer), and a number of Research Associates. We would like to express our appreciation to all those who allowed their workplace interactions to be recorded and the Research Assistants who transcribed the data. The research was supported by a grant from the New Zealand Foundation for Research Science and Technology .

Abstract

This paper is the first in a series providing information about the way language is used in the New Zealand workplace. It outlines the broad aims and scope of the Victoria University of Wellington Language in the Workplace Project, and the approach adopted by the project team in collecting and analysing the workplace data. Research results in a range of areas are briefly outlined, including analyses of speech functions such as directives, small talk and humour, and the social dimensions of professional identity and gender. The paper also indicates how the project's findings have been communicated to the wider community, including teachers, communication skill trainers, HR professionals and others involved in improving workplace communication.

Introduction

The Language in the Workplace (LWP) Project is based at Victoria University. The broad goals of the project are firstly, to identify and analyse features of effective interpersonal communication in a variety of workplaces from a sociolinguistic perspective; and secondly, to explore the practical implications of the results of the research for a range of New Zealand workplaces.

Effective communication with clients and colleagues is clearly crucial to the smooth and productive running of an organisation or business, as many training programmes recognise. But there is remarkably little research which examines in detail how people actually communicate verbally with their colleagues at work on a daily basis, and how they use language to manage the inevitable tensions between their various social and professional roles. Previous research has tended to focus on specialised contexts such as classrooms, courtrooms, and doctor-patient interactions (eg Drew and Heritage 1992), or to use material derived from indirect sources such as self-report data, interviews, and anecdotal observations (eg see Williams 1988, Mott and Petrie 1995). The results have often been rather prescriptive, with rigid rules for how to run a meeting, for example, or how to manage others at work. More recently, there is evidence that researchers have begun to recognise the importance of collecting primary data on workplace interaction, rather than relying on secondary reports (see, for example, Roberts, Jupp and Davies 1992, Sarangi and Slembrouck 1996, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1997, and several of the papers in Hunston 1998, and Sarangi and Roberts 1999). However, there is almost no local New Zealand data to provide a resource for those teaching communication skills in New Zealand workplaces. Our goal was to collect genuine face-to-face spoken interaction in New Zealand workplaces in order to explore the wide diversity of strategies that New Zealanders use to get things done effectively at work.

The current database

Between 1996 and 2000, the Language in the Workplace Project team has recorded nearly 1500 interactions in a range of New Zealand workplaces. These workplaces comprise

- government departments

- factories (one in Auckland and one in Wellington)
- small businesses (eg. plant nursery, recycling business)
- private commercial organisations
- a semi-public organisation

The data includes some workplaces with a relatively high proportion of women, some with a relatively high proportion of Maori workers, and a number with an ethnic and gender balance more closely reflecting the New Zealand norm. Table 1 indicates that altogether, 362 people (200 women and 162 men) from a range of ages and levels within each organisation have been recorded to date (31st October 2000). In terms of ethnicity, 201 of the participants are New Zealand Pakeha, 121 are Maori, 23 are people from Pacific Islands, and 17 are from other ethnic groups, such as Greek or Chinese.

Table 1

Information on interactions

	Government Departments	**Commercial organisations**	**Small businesses**	**Factory**
No of interactions	**352**	**30**	**91**	**1000+**
No of hours (approx)	**30-40**	**30-40**	**15-20**	**30-40**
No of participants	**251**	**50**	**30**	**31**

Table 2

Information on participants

Variable		**Participants**	**Total**
Gender	Female	200	**362**
	Male	162	
Ethnicity	Pakeha	201	**362**
	Maori	121	
	Pacific Islander	23	
	Other	17	

Age	20-29	124	
	30-39	118	
	40-59	113	
	60+	5	
	undeclared	2	**362**
First Language	English	311	**362**
	Other	51	

The data collected by the project team consists of workplace interactions of various kinds and it includes both business talk and social talk. Much of the data from government departments comprises small, relatively informal work-related meetings and discussions, some on the phone, but most face-to face, and varying in length between twenty seconds and two hours. This data comes mainly from policy and advisory units, an environment where talk is integral to the core business of the workplace. Such meetings fulfil a wide variety of purposes in these workplaces: to plan, to convey instructions, to seek advice, to check reports, to solve a problem or do a task, to provide feedback, to evaluate proposals, and so on. We also tape-recorded and video-taped a number of larger, and generally longer, meetings. For instance, from large commercial and semi-public organisations, we collected sets of more formal meetings, typically involving project teams who met regularly over a period of time, and sometimes for several months. In the factories, we recorded team meetings, briefing sessions, one-to-one interactions between individuals on the factory floor and in the white-collar workers' offices, communications over the factory intercom system, and conversations in the control room. In small businesses, in addition to typical work-related interactions, more social conversations at smoko (morning tea-time) and lunchtime were a particular focus.

For all workplaces we have amassed a rich fund of ethnographic information to assist with interpreting the data, complemented in some cases with more systematic structured observations of work patterns before recording commenced. Wherever relevant, we have also collected written documentation to background the spoken communication, including agendas and minutes of meetings, reports, notices, manuals, production documents, and so on. The LWP corpus thus provides an especially rich source for investigating how language functions in the ongoing construction of relationships in New Zealand workplaces.

Data collection

The methodology adopted in the core project has been ground-breaking and innovative in a number of respects. Initially devised for collecting workplace interaction in white collar environments, it was later adapted for recording in the much less hospitable (for a tape-recorder) environment of the factory floor. Here I simply sketch the broad outlines of the methodology; a detailed description is provided in Stubbe forthcoming a (LWP Occasional Paper 2).

In all the sites where we have collected data, the methodology has been designed to give participants the maximum control possible over the data collection process. Moreover, all those involved, and all those whose voices have been recorded, have provided information on their ethnic background, home language,

age and so on, as well as detailed contextual information, and permission for the data to be used for linguistic analysis. Three main approaches have been used to collect the data. While all three represent attempts to reduce the inevitable "interference" effect of researchers on the "naturalness" of the data, each takes a somewhat different route to that end.

Participants as data collectors

When we began designing the data collection for the LWP project, our goal was to collect as wide a spectrum of workplace interaction as possible, but, ideally, we did not want the data collection process to influence or alter the way people normally spoke to each other at work (see Stubbe 1998a). Inevitably, however, observers with tape recorders DO alter the way people interact. We resolved this "observer's paradox" (Labov 1972) by devising a way of minimising the unavoidable effects: we asked a group of volunteers from a number of workplaces to do the tape-recording for us. They were asked to record a range of their everyday work interactions over a period of about two weeks. This included social and task-oriented talk, telephone interactions and formal meetings, with the aim of providing between four hours and ten hours of recorded talk. In order to collect this data some kept a tape recorder and microphone on their desks, while others carried the equipment round with them.

Throughout the data collection process participants were free to edit and delete material as they wished. Even after they had completed recording and handed over the tapes, they could ask us to edit out material which they felt, in retrospect, they did not wish us to analyse. Over a period of time, however, people increasingly ignored the recording equipment, and there are often comments at the end of interactions indicating people had forgotten about the tape recorder. Also over time the amount of material they deleted, or which they asked us to edit out, decreased dramatically. By handing over control of the recording process in this way, an excellent research relationship with our workplace participants was developed, based on mutual trust. In return for guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, the volunteers provided a wide range of fascinating material.

Recording formal meetings

One of our more specific goals in examining workplace interaction was to analyse the structure of meetings and particularly to identify the processes by which decisions were reached or achieved. In order to collect a suitable data set for analysis of larger, more formal meetings, we worked with a number of "natural teams" in larger organisations such as New Zealand Telecom and Mobil Oil. In a pilot project, we collected data from a medium-sized (9 participants) management team working over two days on strategic planning for their organisation. This enabled us to devise a data collection method which was minimally intrusive, and which we adapted for use with teams meeting regularly over a period of time.

The basic method for collecting meeting data involved setting up two video cameras just before the participants began to gather in the room where the meeting was to take place. Between the two cameras we captured all the participants at the meeting table. The videotapes were switched on as we left, and they continued till we returned so that the whole meeting was recorded, including pre-meeting and post-meeting talk. We also recorded the meetings on audio-tapes. One member of the team, usually the person taking the minutes, took responsibility for turning over the tapes. This resulted in the collection of excellent quality audio-recorded data, as well as video- recordings of a large number of formal meetings.

Collecting factory data

The latest modification of the team's methodology involved devising a way to collect data in the environment of a busy factory where machine noise threatened to drown out most talk, and where verbal interaction was often brief, intense and typically sporadic. In one factory, we confined data collection to offices and avoided the factory floor. In the other, however, we were invited to work with a high performance factory production team to identify the secret of their success, and this unavoidably involved dealing with the problems of high levels of noise and activity.

Given the nature of their factory work, it was not possible for people to record themselves. We therefore used a young friendly fieldworker, Megan Ingle, to collect the data. Initially, Megan simply accompanied the team manager on her factory rounds, noting features of the lay-out and procedures, logistical and technical problems, potential recording opportunities, and so on. Later as she became increasingly familiar to the team members, she began to record interactions, as opportunities arose. Another variation of our methodology was the use of radio microphones carried by more peripatetic team members, which further reduced the intrusiveness of the recording process. Portable digital minidisc recorders also improved the quality of the spoken material. Initially, recording was undertaken for a rolling three to four hours a day over successive shifts in order to obtain samples from each part of a typical day, and each day of the 4-day shift (Stubbe and Ingle 1999). Subsequent recording extended to a wider range of interactions, including one-to-one discussions, briefing meetings, and communication via the factory intercom and in the control room from one entire 4-day shift..

Together these three approaches have provided a unique data set. We are not aware of any other research project which has managed to collect such a richly diverse set of workplace interactions, ranging from the formal strategic planning sessions of a group of regional managers, to the early morning briefing meetings of a soap factory production team, and including talk at smoko as well as interactions involving some very highly paid Chief Executive Officers.

Analysis of the data

The analysis of the data has taken two broad directions to date. The first has involved examining particular features or functions of workplace talk, such as directives, small talk and social talk, and humour (see below). The second has explored the impact of a particular social variable, such as gender (Holmes 2000a, Holmes et al. forthcoming, Holmes and Stubbe forthcoming), ethnicity (Stubbe and Holmes 2000) or professional status (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1999, Holmes 2000a, Holmes et al. forthcoming), and examined the extent to which the variable has proved relevant and the ways in which it has been instantiated in workplace interaction. Although I have here distinguished these different approaches for the purposes of discussion and illustration, there is clearly considerable overlap between them, and they are typically closely integrated in any particular study.

Speech functions approach

Directives

The research team has examined the way people get things done at work in a wide variety of workplaces, and from a broad range of perspectives. One study examines the ways in which senior women managers get things done in the white collar environment of the policy unit of a government department (Vine 1999, forthcoming). This study illustrates the range of forms that directives may take, from simple imperatives such as *ring them* or *file these* to very complex negotiations which extend over several turns, and sometimes throughout a long interaction. The analysis also indicates the relevance of such factors as the length of the relationship between people working together and the kind of relationship and understandings they have developed. Directives are often complex and subtle negotiations between people who are very aware of their relative roles and responsibilities.

In a factory environment, directives are typically much more briefly encoded (Brown forthcoming). However, again contextual factors prove relevant in accounting for variations in form. Examining the directives used by a factory pay clerk, for instance, it was clear that the status of the addressee, the topic and a subtle cost/benefit factor influenced her choice of directive form. So, for example, to her superiors, on a core business topic say as pay matters, she used more mitigated or softened imperatives (eg. *sign it twice for me please)*, more modalised interrogatives, (eg. *Can you scribble her for V for last week's wages?*), and less direct forms expressed through declaratives (eg *I've got a batch that I need to be returned*). However, on topics relating to social rather than pay matters, she used many more direct and unmitigated imperative forms, even to superiors. Off-task topics tended to bring into focus or make salient the participants' social rather than their professional relationship. Discussing non-work topics, factors such as solidarity or the length of the relationship between co-workers seemed to have more influence than status on the way directives were expressed (Brown and Robertson 2000).

Findings such as these are echoed throughout our workplace research. The analyses provide extensive evidence of the very "situated" nature of workplace interaction. While some messages can be communicated relatively directly, the precise choice of linguistic form is always influenced by the relationship between those talking, and the context of their talk. And, more often, workplace goals are achieved through a much more dynamic process, with participants negotiating their way to a resolution using complex and sophisticated discourse strategies.

Small talk

The crucial role of small talk and social talk at work has become increasingly apparent with the growth of research in this area (eg. Coupland 2000). Small talk and social talk occurred in all the workplaces in which we recorded. People used small talk at the boundaries of interaction, at the beginning and end of the day, at the start and end of meetings, and sometimes at topic boundaries within meetings (see Holmes 2000b).

Small talk in the workplace functions like knitting. It can be easily taken up and easily dropped. It is a useful, undemanding means of filling a gap between work activities, which also oils the social wheels. Our data illustrates how, at the beginning of an interaction, small talk assists the transition from interpersonal or social talk to work or task-oriented talk. Similarly, at the end of an interaction, small talk provides a means of finishing on a positive note, referring, however briefly, to the personal component of the relationship after a period when work roles and responsibilities have dominated the interaction. Small talk is flexible, adaptable, compressible and expandable. Interestingly, we found it can be as formulaic or as personal as people wish to make it. These characteristics make it eminently attractive as a discourse strategy in managing workplace relationships (Holmes 2000b).

Our analyses of the various functions of small talk at work indicate that in addition to its obvious contribution, as "positive facework", to constructing solidarity, it also has a less obvious role in expressing and maintaining power relationships. So, for example, professional equals use small talk to "do collegiality"; in unequal encounters, on the other hand, small talk may be used not only to establish and maintain good relations with subordinates, but sometimes as an expression of "repressive discourse" (Pateman 1980), with superiors manipulating small talk to achieve organisational goals (Holmes 2000b).

Our research on the distribution, functions and typical topics of small talk in New Zealand workplaces has obvious implications for those joining the New Zealand workforce for the first time. We have explored the implications of our findings in two such contexts: firstly, for those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, where both linguistic and cultural differences may provide a barrier to workplace acceptance (Holmes 1998a, 1999a, 2000c); and, secondly, for those with intellectual disabilities, and for whom, acquiring the appropriate language for managing the transition to work is a major hurdle (Holmes et al 2000, Holmes and Fillary 2000).

Humour

Humour is another important and interesting function of language which makes an intriguingly complex contribution to workplace interaction. Humour is always intended to be amusing, but in the workplace it serves many other functions too (Holmes 1998b, Holmes 2000d). We found that most workplace humour is inextricably context-bound. Utterances which give rise to great hilarity among work colleagues often appear obscure and opaque to outsiders. This reflects one of the most basic social functions of humour: it serves to create and maintain solidarity, a sense of belonging to a group. Indeed, shared humour is an important in-group vs out-group boundary marker (Holmes and Marra forthcoming a). Humour may also hedge or attenuate face threatening acts such as directives, and negatively affective speech acts such as criticisms and insults. In all these ways, humour contributes to social cohesion in the workplace. It is sensitively oriented to participants' face needs; it is a dynamic means of expressing and constructing solidarity, and an effective strategy for reducing potential offence (Holmes 2000d).

But our data suggested that an adequate model for the analysis of humour needed to integrate politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) with a more critical approach (eg. Fairclough 1989, 1995). In interactions where relative power was particularly salient, the way humour functioned in constructing and negotiating relationships was often more complex. Humour often served as a management strategy - a way of attenuating or reinforcing power relationships (Holmes 2000d). So, for example, humour was sometimes used as a means of embedding a risky or unacceptable proposition in a superficially innocuous utterance. This is one means of using humour to maintain authority and control, while continuing to appear collegial.

Alternatively, we found that humour may be used by subordinates to license a challenge which subverts authority and control (Holmes and Marra forthcoming b). Humour provides an acceptable form or vehicle for contesting the status quo, questioning the validity or accuracy of statements from a superior, for instance, or clothing an insulting attack on the positive face of a superior with a pretence of play. Humour permits the subordinate to embed the challenge, criticism or insult in a socially acceptable form, which makes the negative communicative intent less easy to challenge.

Another aspect of humour which we have examined in some detail is the way in which humorous contributions to workplace discourse are structured. We have analysed, in particular, examples of collaborative humour, i.e. humour which is jointly constructed between different participants in workplace settings (Marra 1998, Holmes and Marra forthcoming c). Collaborating to develop an amusing idea can serve as a remarkably powerful solidarity-building device in the business context. Interestingly, this aspect of humour also appears to be "gendered" (see below).

Social variable approach

Professional status

Sociolinguistics identifies a number of dimensions of analysis which illuminate the ways in which workplace discourse enacts, constructs, maintains and reinforces different social identities (Holmes forthcoming). Our workplace analyses have focussed to date on just two such dimensions, namely professional status, and gender.

In analysing the ways in which people perform their professional identity at work, we focussed in some detail on the professional identities constructed by those working in a government policy unit (Holmes et al 1999, Stubbe 1998b). "Doing being a manager", for instance, is a fascinating discourse performance which is evident across a wide range of activities and interactions at work. Managers are often quite explicit in asserting their authority, selecting direct, transparent, "on-record" ways of giving instructions, seeking information, providing approval and agreeing, running meetings, and so on. On the other hand, the effective managers we observed were also adept at using more consensual strategies, negotiating agreements, mitigating directives, where appropriate, and diverting discussions heading for overt conflict.

Subordinates similarly performed their professional identities in the workplace using a range of appropriate discourse strategies. This was evident in skills demonstrated in negotiating agreement on precise responsibilities in relation to a task, eliciting clarification of a directive from a superior, or expressing a complaint in an acceptable way from a less powerful position. Professional identities were also apparent in the ways turns at talk were organised, and the contributions made by different participants to different kinds of "floor".

Our analyses suggest that caution is important in making generalisations. In the course of a single interaction, participants might orient to a number of different identities and goals, either simultaneously or at different points in time. These included their institutional identity (involving their professional role and status), their social identity (including their gender and ethnic group membership), and their personal identity (e.g. their wish to be considered friendly or well-informed). Professional workers are clearly engaged in a constant process of striking a balance between often competing identities. They actively construct those aspects of their identity which are most relevant to their interactional goals in a given context and at a particular time. Different identities can become more or less salient in different contexts, and at any particular point in an interaction.

The research we have undertaken thus indicates that the construction of professional status and identity interacts very clearly with other sociolinguistic dimensions, such as the kind of relationship which has been established between participants - in this case, professionals in the workplace. Directives oriented to a new administrative assistant were negotiated rather differently than those to a familiar "old hand". Meetings between colleagues who knew each other well, and who had worked together effectively over a long period, differed in interesting ways from meetings between those who were less familiar with each other. So, for example, the way participants sought advice and support, was done rather differently in each case. Those who knew each other well tended to be more direct and to dispense with negative face redress. Conversely, they incorporated into their interaction a great many positive politeness strategies, such as use of first names, explicit expressions of agreement or approval, appreciation, sympathy and humour. Swearing was also possible in such interactions, whereas it was rarer in interactions between non-equals and non-existent between those who did not know each other well.

Gender

The interaction between language and gender has been an area of research interest for project members over many years (eg. Holmes 1984, 1995, Stubbe 1991, Vine 1995). It has proved a fascinating aspect of workplace interaction too. Approaches which simply dichotomise the way women and men interact have been heavily criticised, especially when they suggest that such differences are unavoidable, culturally conditioned or even innate (eg see Cameron 1992, Crawford 1995). Sociolinguists have pointed to the many sources of diversity and variation (such as age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, social context, social goals, and so on), which need to be taken into account in comparing women's and men's styles of interaction.

The workplace interactions we have analysed provide abundant support for this position. It is simply not possible to make meaningful generalisations about the behaviour of "women" vs "men" at work which ignore the complexities of the influence of their particular roles, professional identities and specific goals, and the social contexts in which they are operating. On the other hand, when we examine the particularities of the way people interact at work, there is sometimes evidence of interestingly gendered patterns (Holmes and Stubbe forthcoming), as well as evidence of patterns that challenge and refute traditional stereotypes of the way women and men operate at work (Holmes 2000a, Holmes et al forthcoming).

We found, for instance, analysing the interactions of women who had been clearly identified as excellent and effective managers, that their discourse patterns often reflected considerable verbal flexibility and what has been called a "wide-verbal-repertoire speech style" (Case 1995: 150), integrating features typically associated both with masculine and feminine speech style in earlier research.

These women skilfully kept control of the discourse in meetings, while also paying attention to the positive face needs of their colleagues, and to the requirements of a collegial and pleasant work environment. Like stereotypical managers, they generally dominated the talking time in meetings (eg. James and Drakich 1993), but they also used a wide variety of more subtle strategies to keep constructive control of the discourse. They carefully managed different phases of the meeting, including the opening and closing stages; they kept the discussion on track, bringing people back to the topic when they digressed, summarising progress at regular intervals, and indicating clearly what decisions had been reached at particular points in the meeting. They were prepared to devote time and effort to negotiating consensus, and checking agreement. They were firm and authoritative when necessary, but they also used more facilitative strategies, such as humour as appropriate. They explicitly checked that consensus had been reached and clearly indicated what needed to happen next, ensuring follow-up took place. These women managers enacted, in other words, a complex professional identity skilfully drawing on a range of discourse strategies, some of which have formerly been regarded as typically feminine and others as typically masculine. Hence, our research suggests that stereotypical "gendering" of styles is increasingly inappropriate, at least in illuminating workplace interaction (Stubbe, Holmes, Vine and Marra 2000).

Interesting patterns have also emerged in our analyses of the way gender intersects with humour in the workplace (Holmes et al forthcoming, Holmes, Marra and Burns forthcoming, Holmes 2000a). There is a widespread stereotype which characterises a woman as a humourless creature, a person "who lacks both the ability to appreciate others' humor and the desire or ability to create humor herself" (Crawford 1995: 2). This stereotype extends to women at work. According to some researchers, "women may have a lower propensity to use humor as a part of their professional repertoire" (Cox, Read and van Auken,1990: p. 293). However, our analyses of the amount and type of humour in a set of workplace meetings firmly contradicts this suggestion (Holmes and Marra forthcoming c, Holmes, Marra and Burns forthcoming).

In the workplace interactions we analysed, women contributed at least as much humour as men. Moreover, those in leadership positions in these meetings, the Chairs and managers, contributed even more to the overall amount of humour in business meetings than did individual participants. And again there was no evidence that female Chairs contributed less humour than male Chairs. If humour is associated with creativity and a positive atmosphere in meetings, there is ample evidence here that women Chairs play their part in fostering such positive characteristics.

Examining in more detail the type of humour that occurs in meetings, we found that meetings in which women were participants were more often characterised by supportive humour, ie humour that reinforced or confirmed a previous speaker's point. The humour in meetings in which only men were participants, by contrast, was often very contestive and challenging. Moroever, a high energy, maximally shared floor with frequent turn overlapping, and strong cohesive ties between contributions to the humour sequence was more likely to develop in contexts where both genders were participants, and least likely in those where only men were present. Conversely, a minimallycollaborative, or competitive type of floor tended to develop more often in groups involving only men, or in which men predominated. Hence "gendered" patterns of interaction may emerge from the detail of qualitative analysis, although such analysis also reveals the complexities of the ways they are instantiated.

In this section I have provided some examples of the range of analyses the LWP team has undertaken in the last four years. There is currently further work in progress, providing detailed analyses of particular processes apparent in many workplace interactions. These include the analysis of the processes by which people negotiate directives in the workplace (Vine forthcoming), reach decisions in meetings (Marra 2000, forthcoming), and the processes by which people resolve problems encountered in workplace interaction (Stubbe forthcoming b, c). In addition, a "communities of practice" framework (Wenger 1998, Holmes 1999b) is being used to explore ways in which particular patterns of interaction contribute to a distinctive workplace culture, with patterns of humour (Holmes and Marra forthcoming c), gender (Holmes and

Stubbe forthcoming), and the role of email in organisations (Waldvogel forthcoming) as initial areas of research. All these studies focus explicitly on the interactional process, examining the discourse structures and strategies involved, and their relationship to a range of relevant theoretical models.

I turn finally to a brief outline of the ways in which the research team has explored the implications of the results of the research undertaken to date for a wide range of workplace contexts, and a brief indication of some of the steps we have taken to communicate our findings to those whom, we hope, will benefit from them.

Implications and applications

The research undertaken by the LWP team has potential applications in a very wide range of areas. In exploring these applications, we have adopted a variety of strategies.

Firstly, we have published material which explores the implications of our research for applied linguists and for teachers engaged with preparing people for interaction at work. We have, for instance, outlined relevant findings, and suggested appropriate teaching materials derived from them for ESOL teachers involved with preparing immigrant workers for New Zealand workplaces (Holmes 1998a, 1999a, 2000c). We have also reported on the implications of our research for those engaged in teaching workers with intellectual disabilities (Holmes 1998a, Holmes et al. 2000, Holmes and Fillary 2000). There are many aspects of our analyses with obvious relevance for those joining the New Zealand workplace for the first time. Accurately interpreting directive intent is clearly central to workplace effectiveness. The crucial importance of social talk in the workplace, and the ability to manage talk at "smoko" (tea-break), and around the edges of the day has been very apparent from our analyses. Handling teasing and workplace humour is another area of obvious relevance for newcomers to the New Zealand workplace. In fact, learning to manage the affective and social aspects of workplace interaction emerges as one of the most important priorities for transition to work programmes of all kinds.

A second thrust of the applied aspects of our research has involved presentations, workshops and seminars for those involved in workplace communication skills training of all kinds. We have presented our findings first to the particular workplaces where we have collected data, and then to many other groups and workplaces who have invited us to discuss our findings or to run workshops. We have also outlined our results to professional groups (teachers, communication experts, HR communication skills trainers) in seminars, workshops and conference presentations throughout the country, from Auckland to Dunedin. A Language and Gender Symposium, held in Wellington in 1999, provided a very specific forum for researchers and workplace practitioners to explore areas of mutual interest and benefit (Holmes 2000e). Our website (www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp) provides another means of communicating our research results more widely, as well as ensuring easy access to information about our publications and presentations.

Thirdly, we are currently trialling a Communication Evaluation and Development (CED) process as a means of teaching others to use our approach to the analysis of workplace communication, so that they can analyse their own interactions at work. This aspect of the programme is based on the principles of action learning, and its objective is to provide a means for workplace participants to develop their own workplace communication skills (Jones and Stubbe forthcoming). Briefly, it involves an action-reflection approach: participants first examine their current work interaction patterns, then identify aspects they wish to change or improve; thirdly, they define the required change, and finally they monitor their progress towards achieving that change. This cycle is repeated as often as required until participants are satisfied they have achieved their goals.

The CED model combines well with an 'appreciative inquiry' approach (Jones and Stubbe forthcoming), which entails looking for what is done well, and finding ways to share strengths with others and develop them further. This is distinct from looking for 'problems' and setting out to 'solve' them. Appreciative inquiry proceeds from a positive approach to what is already being done in organisations. This has been the starting point for all of the research we have undertaken. Indeed, in the case of one Wellington factory, the HR manager approached us with a proposal which precisely fitted this approach. She had identified a particularly effective team and was interested in our analysis of what accounted for their success. Our current work with this organisation involves exploring ways of using a CED approach to assist other teams to reach similar levels of success. In sum, one of the most successful, innovative, and rewarding aspects of our LWP research programme has been the extent to which it has developed an effective collaborative programme with the people who we hope will benefit from our findings.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an overview of the goals, methods, analytical approaches and implications of the Victoria University of Wellington Language in the Workplace project. The project has broken new ground in a number of respects. It is the first project which has examined interaction in such a wide range of New Zealand workplaces. The LWP team has gathered a wide range of material from a diverse set of contexts, and developed methodologies appropriate to each. The database constitutes a shared resource for all team members. In undertaking description and analysis, different researchers have focussed on different aspects of workplace interaction, including specific speech functions and particular sociolinguistic dimensions. The project as a whole, however, is unified by the sociolinguistic framework within which the analyses have been undertaken, with a predominantly dynamic, social constructionist approach to the analysis of the discourse.

The project is an ongoing one. The next papers in the series of Occasional Papers, of which this is the first, provide more detailed information about the methodology and analyses briefly outlined in this paper. Later papers will also document research currently underway, but not yet completed, on the role of email in the workplace, ways of delineating workplace culture through workplace discourse, and evidence that sexist language is disappearing from written workplace documentation. The series will showcase the diversity of the research emanating from this innovative project, and illustrate the particular strengths of applied sociolinguistic research in constructively contributing to our understanding of communication at work.

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LANGUAGE IN THE WORKPLACE