

Language in the Workplace

In 1996, a team of researchers at Victoria University of Wellington began an innovative study of spoken communication in New Zealand workplaces. The broad aims of the project are to: identify the characteristics of effective communication between people; diagnose possible causes of miscommunication; and explore possible applications of the findings for New Zealand workplaces. More specific areas of interest have included language and gender, humour, small talk, ethnicity and leadership in the workplace, among others. Some key aspects of workplace talk analysed by the project team include:

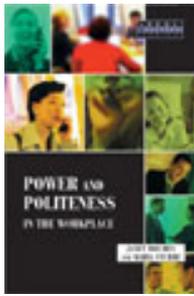
<i>Directives</i>	What is the most effective way of getting things done?
<i>Small talk</i>	Why is social talk important at work?
<i>Humour</i>	How does humour contribute to workplace efficiency?
<i>Gender</i>	Are some workplaces more “masculine” than others?
<i>Leadership</i>	How do effective leaders integrate task-oriented talk with people-oriented talk?
<i>Problem-solving</i>	How do people use talk collaboratively to solve problems?
<i>Meetings</i>	What characterises a “good” meeting? How are meetings structured?
<i>Workplace culture</i>	How does workplace talk construct different workplace cultures?
<i>Ethnicity</i>	Are some workplaces more “Maori” than others?
<i>Miscommunication</i>	How do people negotiate their way through misunderstandings?
<i>Multicultural workplaces</i>	What are the communication challenges for migrant workers?

The project team has developed a distinctive methodology to collect workplace language data. Volunteers in each participating organisation record everyday work-related meetings or discussion, as well as telephone calls and social conversations, and the project team videotapes a number of larger, more formal meetings from each workplace. To date, the project team has recorded approximately 1500 interactions from more than 500 participants in 22 workplaces. The team initially began collecting recordings of workplace interactions in four government organisations. The project was then extended to include recordings from corporate workplaces outside the government sector, and later to include factories and small businesses, as well as medical and IT organisations.

In 2006-2008 the project team is focusing on the language of leadership in New Zealand organizations, in particular a cross-cultural comparison of Māori and Pākehā leaders at work. The team is examining the similarities and differences in Māori and Pākehā leadership styles and exploring what effective Māori leaders do that might be overlooked in a mainstream management analysis. This has involved collecting interactions from two pairs of workplaces matched for industry and size, where one of each pair identifies as a Māori organisation. The findings will appear in a book on discourse, ethnicity and leadership in the New Zealand workplace.

The next stage of research, currently in a pilot phase, involves analysing the discourse of professional migrants in New Zealand workplaces. New Zealand is attracting professional migrants with potential to make a considerable contribution to society, but statistics show many of these migrants are unemployed or underemployed. Inadequate communication skills are frequently identified as obstacles to hiring migrants, but these can often be more accurately attributed to sociolinguistic nuances in communicative styles. The research will identify ways of improving the migrants' social 'fit' and encouraging appreciation among their colleagues of migrants' sociolinguistic skills and diverse cultural resources.

Three books have been produced from the overall Language in the Workplace project so far (pictured below), as well as numerous other publications. Visit the project's website to see a list of all publications and the latest project information: <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/lwp/>



You can contact the Language in the Workplace Project research team at: Language in the Workplace Project, School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington. Tel: (04) 463 5600 Fax: (04) 463 5604. Email: Janet.Holmes@vuw.ac.nz or Meredith.Marra@vuw.ac.nz

The team includes Janet Holmes (Project Director), Meredith Marra (Research Officer) and Bernadette Vine, (Corpus Manager), along with associated researchers and workplace practitioners throughout New Zealand and the world.

Meredith Marra
Lecturer
School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies
PO Box 600
Wellington
New Zealand
meredith.marra@vuw.ac.nz