Analysing New Zealand English in the Workplace

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Introduction[1]

Research on New Zealand English to date has largely relied on material elicited in interviews, by written questionnaires, from observations, and from the media. There has been little research which has examined the ordinary everyday interactions of New Zealanders at work and play. The Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (see Vine's paper in this issue) provides a rich source of such material, especially conversations between friends in their homes. Another project based at Victoria University has been gathering material on the way people talk to each other at work. The Language in the Workplace (LWP) Project has been underway for three years, and has gathered a rich range of material which gives some fascinating insights into the way New Zealanders use English in the workplace[2].

The LWP project began collecting data in Government Departments, since we thought it sensible to begin in white collar workplaces where we were reasonably familiar with the norms for behaviour. The Ministry of Women's Affairs provided our pilot study, and their positive and welcoming attitude allowed us to develop a very effective participatory methodology. In the first year we added three more government departments, one with a high proportion of Maori workers, and two with an ethnic and gender balance more closely reflecting the New Zealand norm. We then branched out to corporations and private organisations, including Mobil Oil (NZ) Ltd and New Zealand Telecom, where we have collected data from a series of meetings involving particular project teams. The most recent extensions of the project have involved forays into factories in Wellington and Auckland, and small businesses in the Hawkes Bay area. These have provided a real challenge to the problem of collecting good quality data suitable for linguistic analysis.

The main aim of the research is to examine the ways in which New Zealanders communicate at work — their discourse and verbal interaction patterns. So far we have analysed the way managers operate in the workplace, how people use small talk at work, strategies for approaching

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[2] The core research has been funded by the NZ Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. Further information can be found by consulting our website, http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/.

problems, the functions of humour in the workplace, and features of the structure of meetings.

Method of data collection

The methodology developed for the LWP project was designed to give participants maximum control over the data collection process (see Stubbe 1998 for more details). In each workplace a group of 'key informants' tape-recorded a range of their everyday work interactions over a period of about two weeks. Some kept a recorder and microphone on their desks; others carried the equipment round with them. We found that people increasingly ignored the recording equipment, as reflected in their comments at the ends of some recordings. In addition, some larger meetings were videotaped in every workplace. Again our aim was to be as non-intrusive as possible: we simply set up two cameras and left people to their own devices. After a remarkably short while people forgot about the cameras, and after a few meetings they were treated as just part of the furniture. Throughout the process participants were free to edit and delete material as they wished. Over time the amount of material they deleted, or which they asked us to edit out, decreased dramatically.

What have we found?

The analyses we have undertaken so far include a range of pragmatic aspects of workplace talk, including directives (Holmes 1998a), social talk (Holmes in press), humour (Holmes 1998b), problem-solving (Stubbe forthcoming) and management style (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine in press). We here provide just one example from this research to illustrate how participants in New Zealand workplaces select appropriate forms for getting things done at work.

Directives

Workplace directives are expressed in a wide variety of ways, both direct and indirect. The choices speakers make generally reflect three different contextual factors: (1) the power relationship between the participants; (2) how long they have worked together and/or how well they know each other; and (3) the difficulty or urgency of what is being asked for.

A preliminary analysis of our data indicates that directives from managers to their assistants were most often clear and direct due to the different status of the participants, while directives between equals or from a subordinate to a superior were more likely to be realised using indirect strategies. However, other factors also have to be taken into account. For instance, where people did not know each other well, they were more likely to mitigate their directives, regardless of status differences, and in interactions between managers and more senior staff working under them, managers often expressed directives using less direct strategies. For example, a directive may be worded in terms of a suggestion or advice rather than a direct imperative, for example, 'maybe you should get in touch with X ...' rather than 'talk to X ...'. In such situations, the manager is not really providing the staff member

with a choice, but the use of a suggestion softens the directive, which helps to maintain a good working relationship.

The examples below are taken from interactions between a manager and two different administrative assistants, and illustrate some of the different ways directives may be expressed. In the first excerpt, the manager is dealing with a temporary secretary she does not know well. Consequently, she initially uses relatively indirect strategies to convey what she wants the assistant to do:

- I wondered if you wouldn't mind spending some of that time in contacting people for their interviews
- what we might need to do is send down a confirmation note
- if we just tell them exactly where it is
- what I suggest you do is read through ...

The use of the pronoun *we* rather than *you*, functions here as a softening device. Similarly, the use of modals and hedged syntactic structures as in 'I wondered if you wouldn't mind', and 'what we might need', and the explicit marker of a suggestion 'what I suggest you do...', all function to reduce the strength of the directive. As the interaction progresses, however, the directives become more direct, making more use of the imperative form and less use of hedging devices:

- ring the applicants and say that ...
- see if you can ring her first
- check to see what time the plane actually lands
- just write down the list of their names

This change probably reflects two things: firstly, the fact that the participants are becoming more comfortable with one another as the interaction proceeds, and secondly, the fact that there is some urgency since the time for another meeting is approaching.

This interaction contrasts with an exchange between the same manager and her usual executive assistant when the latter arrives back from leave. The directives here are more direct right throughout the interaction, reflecting the fact that these two have worked closely together for a long time, and can afford to dispense with elaborate politeness strategies:

- all the letters should go on the file
- that needs to be couriered today
- I need a master sheet
- you need to just check the travel booking
- will you let me know what the story is

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that even these relatively direct instructions are realised by a range of linguistic forms other than simple imperatives, including declaratives, personal and impersonal 'need' statements, and interrogatives.

These different directives illustrate one of the key characteristics of effective communication in the workplaces that we have studied, namely its stylistic and functional flexibility. Our informants show a remarkable ability to modify the way they talk according to the context, and to manipulate the relationship between linguistic form and function to achieve specific interactional goals. Even within a single interaction, speech acts may be realised by relatively direct discourse strategies at one point, and by very indirect strategies at others. The same speech acts, strategies and linguistic forms may also be quite differently motivated in different contexts. Relevant factors include not only the nature of the relationship between the participants, but also the purpose of the interaction, the setting, relative degrees of expertise and who set up or initiated the interaction. These contextual factors are crucial for interpreting the function of a given utterance within an interactional sequence.

Applications

The data we have collected and analysed is being used for a variety of purposes. In some workplaces, Human Resources and training practitioners are interested in using our results to evaluate communication in their organisations, and to provide input for communication skills training courses and organisational development programmes. In the Hawkes Bay area, the places collecting data are businesses who provide opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to begin work in a supportive context. The value of genuine data from the workplaces where students will be placed is obvious. It is being used by staff teaching these students at the Eastern Institute of Technology to better prepare them for workplace interaction. The Auckland data is being collected from a factory which employs large numbers of staff for whom English is a second language, and which provides ESOL courses for its staff. Again, accurate information about the ways in which New Zealand English is used in the factory will be of direct value to those learning English to assist them to cope in the factory environment. Workplace tutors and language teachers will be able to use information from the project for assessment and evaluation, curriculum design and the production of learning materials.

While there has been a good deal of previous research into the discourse patterns of New Zealand English, the analysis of the use of English in New Zealand workplaces is a relatively new area of exploration. Its benefits, however, are obvious, and it is an area where there is scope for some very interesting and challenging interdisciplinary collaboration.

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