

*School of Linguistics and  
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*Discourse in the Workplace*

*Literature Review*

*Janet Holmes*

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**Discourse in the Workplace  
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## *Language in the Workplace Occasional Papers*

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. The second describes the methodology adopted to collect workplace interaction, and its developments and adaptations to the very different demands of disparate workplaces. Subsequent papers provide more detailed analyses of particular aspects of workplace interaction as well as descriptions of methodologies for researching workplace communication.

### **These include**

- 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
- an examination of the varied literature on the role of e-mail at work
- an analysis of problem-solving discourse

**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), Dr Bernadette Vine (Corpus Manager), 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.*

## **Introduction<sup>i</sup>**

The analysis of workplace discourse is a research area which has grown considerably in the last ten years, thus posing a challenge in terms of a comprehensive review. This chapter is therefore necessarily selective, though hopefully it indicates something of the breadth and depth, as well as the fascination, of current research on workplace discourse.

Early research on workplace discourse focussed on doctor-patient interaction (eg. Fisher and Todd 1983), and legal language, especially courtroom discourse (eg. Atkinson and Drew 1979), and these remain areas of interest for many researchers see, for example, Eades 2008; Olsson this volume; Halkowski this volume). But the scope of research has broadened considerably in the last thirty years and now encompasses many different types of institutional and non-institutional contexts, as well as many different aspects of workplace interaction, such as the structure of talk in negotiations, the role of humour and small talk at work, the construction of professional identities in the workplace, and the place of email in workplace interaction.

While recognising that much valuable work has been undertaken on written discourse in workplace contexts (eg. Gunnarsson 2009, Candlin and Hyland 1999), this chapter focuses on talk at work. The next section provides an overview and discussion of current research on spoken workplace discourse. Overall, this discussion focuses on qualitative rather than quantitative approaches, as illustrated in more detail in the third section which uses a brief case study drawn from the work of the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) to illustrate some of the points discussed. The chapter ends with some brief reflections on potential future directions for the analysis of workplace discourse.

## **Current research on spoken workplace discourse**

Following a brief note on methodology, this section discusses research on workplace discourse in three broad categories: firstly, different types of workplace interaction, secondly,

two well-established, broad sociolinguistic dimensions of analysis – power and solidarity; and thirdly, two areas of social variation, gender and ethnicity in the workplace.

*Methodology: a brief note*

A wide range of methodologies for data collection and analysis has been used in workplace research. While ethnographic approaches involving participant observation and interviews often provide supplementary data, the prevailing data collection methodology in workplace discourse research involves recording talk in “authentic” situations. Early researchers, using a predominantly CA approach to analysis, audio-recorded relatively formal interactions such as job interviews (eg Button and Lee 1987), interactions between health visitors and clients (eg. Heritage and Sefi 1992), and service encounters (Jefferson and Lee 1981; Merritt 1984). Others focussed on collecting audio- and sometimes video-recordings of workplace meetings (eg. Cuff and Sharrock 1986; Boden 1994; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996). Gradually, the scope of recording expanded, and Clyne (1994) describes a project where factory workers from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds carried microphones to record their everyday workplace talk. This methodology has since been expanded and adapted for a wide range of different workplaces (Holmes and Stubbe 2003a), and it is currently the predominant approach used in collecting workplace interaction (eg. Koester 2006; Richards 2006; Mullany 2007; Schnurr 2008a).

In terms of analysis, current research exemplifies a range of approaches to analysing workplace discourse, ranging from ethnographic approaches, through micro-level description of the details of talk provided by CA approaches to the politically-motivated framework adopted by Critical Discourse Analysts (CDA), and the more quantitative approach of corpus analysts. These are discussed in greater detail elsewhere in this volume.<sup>ii</sup> This chapter concentrates instead on giving readers a sense of the range of contexts and the dimensions of analysis that researchers in workplace discourse have found useful. One distinction which has proved valuable is the distinction between the transactional (or referential) dimension and the relational (or interpersonal or affective) dimension of meaning in talk (eg. Halliday 1973; Holmes 1982). Analysts emphasise the fact that the distinction is simply a useful heuristic tool, since every interaction has elements of both dimensions of meaning as will be apparent in the excerpts discussed below. In current research, the distinction facilitates the analysis of the complexities of a wide range of different kinds of workplace interaction, such as small and large meeting discourse and talk in service encounters, as well as the construction of

professional identity, including leadership and expert identity. Some of this complexity will emerge in the discussion which follows.

### *Different types of workplace interaction*

In this section, research on workplace interaction in different kinds of settings is discussed. The main focus is on meetings, probably the most extensive area of workplace discourse analysis, followed by a brief discussion of research on service encounters and other occupational genres.

White collar professionals spend a very large proportion of their time in *meetings* (Barnes 2007). Angouri and Marra (in prep) note that different studies (involving different methods of calculation) indicate that meetings occupy anything between 25% and 80% of the work time of the white-collar workforce. At either end of this range, as they say, “the meeting is clearly a significant communicative event in the workplace” (in prep). It is not surprising, then, that discourse analysts have devoted a good deal of attention to meeting talk, examining the discursive strategies used in the management of meetings (eg. Barbato 1994; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996; Asmuss and Svennevig 2009), and the complexities of how things get accomplished interactionally through meeting talk (eg. Drew and Heritage 1992; Willing 1992; Firth 1995; Sarangi and Roberts 1999; Tracy 2007; Geyer 2008). More specifically, those using a CA approach have identified patterns which help define a meeting, such as the structure of the opening and closing phases (Boden 1994; Mirivel and Tracy 2005; Chan 2008), and the distribution of turns (Barnes 2007), while others have discussed discursive ways in which topics are demarcated in meetings (Bublitz 1988; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris 1996).

Research by the Wellington LWP team notes that conventions for formal meeting openings and closings often differ for different cultural groups, and such differences may influence workplace meeting norms, as was evident in the Māori workplaces they researched (Holmes, Marra and Schnurr 2008). Researchers analysing the discourse patterns in meetings between Chinese and British business people (Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2003, 2008), between Chinese and English-speaking Westerners (Bilbow 1997, 2002) and between Japanese and American business people (Yamada 1997) have similarly identified culturally significant contrasting patterns in the appropriate ways of interacting in such meetings. Workplace interactions

between American and Japanese workers in car-manufacturing factories have been studied by Sunaoshi (2005), with a focus on how workers from different cultural backgrounds negotiate through to understanding. And there is considerable work by interactional sociolinguists on intercultural communication, focussing especially on the significance for migrants of miscommunication in crucial work sites such as job and promotion interviews (Roberts, Jupp and Davies 1992, Roberts and Campbell 2005, Campbell and Roberts 2007). (See also Corbett this volume).

The importance of the relational dimension in meeting talk has been given quite explicit attention by some discourse analysts (e.g. Morand 1996a, 1996b; Holmes and Stubbe 2003a,b; Koester 2006; Mullany 2006). It is common for meeting openings to be preceded by solidarity-building social talk, for example, as people wait for the meeting participants to assemble (Mirivel and Tracy 2005), and occasionally small talk also surfaces within meetings (Holmes 2000). But more subtly, relational aspects of interaction are also pervasively evident throughout meeting talk on predominantly transactional issues, as Geyer (2008) illustrates in her detailed post-modern analysis of facework in six faculty meetings in Japanese secondary schools.

Meetings are also sites for constructing and enacting facets of professional identity. While there is some research on aspects of professional identity in meetings between just two or three participants (Lindgren 2000; Vine 2004; Koester 2006), most analyses focus on relatively large group meetings. In such contexts, the role of the meeting chair provides many opportunities for asserting status and “doing power”, since the chair has the right to declare the meeting open, to move discussion to new agenda items, to summarise progress, to ratify decisions, and to close the meeting (eg. Bilbow 1998; Holmes and Stubbe 2003a; Angouri and Marra 2009).

Discourse analysts have also examined features of *service encounters* involving different interactional contexts, ranging from corner shops (Placencia 2004) through bookshops (Aston 1988) and hair salons (Hamilton 1997), to supermarkets (Kuiper 2009), and including telephone transactions (Yotsokura 2003; Pawelczyk 2005; Brown and Crawford 2009). Research has focussed on the structure and dynamics of service transactions (Aston 1992; Robinson 2001), including the role of small talk, humour, and other politeness devices (Kong 1998; Cheepen 2000; Placencia 2004; Kerbat-Orecchioni 2006; Traverso 2006; Kuiper



2009), and the discourse analysis sometimes involves consideration of the skilful use of more than one language to accomplish interactional goals in service encounters (eg. Torras and Gafaranga 2002; Ryoo 2007; Kuiper 2009; Leung 2009; Ayoola 2009). The ways in which discourse is used to construct and negotiate different aspects of social identity by participants has also been analysed in this context (Bastos 2002; Prego-Vazquez 2007).

Finally, there is a small body of research which focuses on more specialised occupational genres, such as the discourse of auctioneers, sportscasters, and weather forecasters (Kuiper 1996, 2009), and the structural features of airline pilot talk (Nevile 2004, 2006, 2007a,b) including how these contribute to the construction of complex occupational identities (Ashcraft 2007).

#### *Power and Solidarity in workplace interaction*

These two dimensions of analysis provide a framework for discussing research on how people perform leadership at work, as well as for considering the role of humour and narrative in workplace interaction.

There is a huge literature on leadership but the “turn to discourse” in this area has been relatively recent (eg. see Ford 2006). Earlier research used questionnaire and interview data rather than examining how leaders actually talk at work. Since, according to one study, leaders spend on average “between 62% and 89% of their time in face-to-face communication”, and “between one-third and two-thirds of their time communicating with their subordinates” in the workplace (Gardner, Callan and Terry 1996: 153), a focus on their workplace talk seems well justified. The research of the LWP team has been seminal in this area (eg. Holmes and Marra 2006; Marra, Schnurr and Holmes 2006a; Holmes, Schnurr and Marra 2007; Schnurr, Marra and Holmes 2007; Vine et al. 2008; Holmes 2009). Their detailed discourse analyses support claims by leadership scholars (e.g. Fairhurst and Sarr 1996; Fairhurst 2007; Sayers 1997) that effective leadership talk evidences a range of diverse competencies, including transactional skills oriented to achieving workplace objectives, and relational skills which take account of interpersonal aspects of communication, such as establishing rapport with colleagues, and attenuating directives. Social constructionist approaches thus emphasise the complexities and ambiguities associated with accomplishing leadership, as well as the importance of discourse in managing meaning (e.g. Grint 2001; Alvesson and Sveningsson 2003).

Current theories of leadership highlight the importance both of assertiveness and authority, qualities normatively associated with masculine styles of interaction, as well as “well-honed relational skills” (Ahearne, Matthieu and Rapp 2005), attributes normatively associated with more feminine interactional styles. Thus both women and men must negotiate a complex path through the social expectations which surround the leadership role to construct a satisfactory identity in their specific communities of practice (Wodak 1997; Baxter 2003, 2010; Holmes, 2006a; Mullany 2006; Schnurr 2008a). In this process, effective leaders draw from a wide and varied discursive repertoire, selecting appropriate discursive strategies in response to particular interactional contexts (Martín Rojo and Esteban 2003). Using a feminist post-structuralist theoretical perspective to analyse interview data, Baxter argues that, in addition, effective leaders need to “juggle between different and competing subject positions” in order to fulfil a range of business goals, and that female leaders have added demands “in order to sustain a credible set of identities as a leader” (2008: 217). Gender in workplace discourse research is discussed further below.

Research on speech functions such as directives also involves consideration of the power dimension in workplace discourse analysis. Good management entails getting people to do things at work. Vine (2004) examines the range of ways in which directives are expressed in the interactions of four senior employees in a government department. She demonstrates, in particular, that the force of any directive, and especially its interpersonal or relational impact, is greatly influenced by its precise discursive positioning in a particular social context, with the relevant context sometimes extending over several meetings. Similar conclusions have resulted from the analysis of workplace disagreement and negotiation (eg. Holmes and Marra 2004; Richards 2006; Koester 2006; Geyer 2008). A related strand of speech function research has focussed on the challenges for those from other cultures in appropriately expressing problematic or challenging speech acts such as refusals and complaints, especially when these are directed upwards to those in positions of greater power (Clyne, Ball and Neil 1991; Clyne 1994; Holmes 2006b).

Turning to the solidarity dimension, humour has attracted a good deal of attention from workplace discourse analysts (see Schnurr 2008a for a recent review). Early research in this area often argued that workplace humour benefited employment relationships by increasing job satisfaction, creativity, and even productivity (eg. Morreall, 1991; Clouse and Spurgeon 1995). In contexts as diverse as hospitals (Pizzini 1991), paramedical departments

(Rosenberg 1991), hotel kitchens (Brown and Keegan 1999), and police departments (Pogrebin and Poole 1988), humour was shown to have beneficial effects.

Looking at the 'darker side' of workplace humour, others argued that it could be used manipulatively, as a control mechanism, for example, by the chair in white-collar business meetings (Mullany 2004), or by the management in a factory to encourage conformity to group norms (Collinson 1988). Alternatively, humour was construed as a strategy for expressing resistance. In a white-collar, commercial context, Rodrigues and Collinson (1995) demonstrated that Telecom employees in Brazil not only used humour (and particularly cartoons) as a safety valve for channelling emotions and expressing dissatisfaction, but also as a weapon of contestation and a means to effect change.

More recently, humour has been considered as a component of workplace culture (eg. Holmes and Marra 2002; Schnurr 2008a). To a greater or lesser extent, every organisation develops a distinct workplace culture, and particular workplace teams often develop as distinctive communities of practice, with particular ways of doing things and systems of shared understandings within an organisation. Humour frequently plays a part in this process. A study of humour in three New Zealand IT companies, for instance, demonstrated that a distinctively masculine, contestive and challenging style of interactive humour tended to characterise these communities of practice (Plester 2007, 2008). A similar bantering and "jousting" style of interaction, characterised by witty comments, boasting and bragging, and verbal duelling, was identified in a Washington brokerage firm (Boxer 2002: 160ff). In British academic and research team contexts, Richards (2006) illustrates a more affiliative and collaborative style of humour in meetings, contrasting with different styles in different communities of practice in less formal contexts. Others have examined how workplace leaders and their team members often use humour to collaborate in constructing not only a particular type of workplace culture, but also a leadership style appropriate to their particular community of practice (Marra and Holmes 2007, Schnurr 2008b). And the contribution of humour to professional identity construction among service workers has also been analysed (Tracy, Myers and Scott 2006).

Research on workplace narratives has similarly examined their contribution to the construction of complex professional identities (eg. Olsson 2000; Dyer and Keller-Cohen 2000; Holmes and Marra 2005; Coates and Thornborrow 2005; Mullany 2006). While most

researchers have focused on the construction of workplace identities through individual's narratives, some have shown how groups (often jointly) use stories to construct themselves as a productive and professional team, or a competitive squad, as a 'family business' or a streamlined organization (Boyce 1995, 1996; Gabriel 1998; Kaye 1996; Richards 2006). Conversely, like humour, narrative also provides a subtle means of contesting or subverting the prevailing organisational ethos or workplace culture, through stories which present an alternative reality. And workplace stories also provide a means of constructing the professional identities of others as effective or inadequate, competent or incompetent team members.

Narrative can also make an important contribution to gendered discourse, reinforcing stereotypical constructs of masculinity, such as "hierarchy, order, structure, dominance, competitiveness, rivalry, aggression and goal-oriented action" (Baxter 2003: 147), or normatively feminine dimensions such as egalitarianism, collaboration and cooperation (Holmes and Stubbe 2003b). An interesting foray into a blue collar work context, for instance, demonstrated how three white, working class, male builders constructed their professional identities through collaborative narratives while travelling in a truck between different building sites (Baxter and Wallace 2009). The next section focuses explicitly on gender in workplace discourse.

#### *Gender and ethnicity in the workplace*

Inevitably gender has already crept into the discussion of workplace discourse analysis at several points, reflecting the steady increase in research in this area. The ways in which discourse contributes to the construction of gendered identities at work has attracted particular attention (eg. Kendall and Tannen 1997; Kendall 2003; Holmes 2006b; Mullany 2007; Schnurr 2008a; McRae 2009). Again the predominant paradigm is a dynamic, social constructionist approach, recognising that both women and men operate within the constraints of over-arching society-wide behavioural norms and expectations in constructing their gender identity in the workplace (Cameron 2009; McElhinny 2007; Wodak 2008). The challenges which people often face in enacting workplace roles involving conflicting sets of norms for speaking have been identified by a number of language and gender researchers (eg. McElhinny 2003; Holmes 2006; Baxter 2008, 2010). The pervasive power of gender norms is particularly evident when the spotlight is turned on those contesting them in some way. So,

for example, the policewomen observed and interviewed by McElhinny (1995) commented that they deliberately repressed any emotional (normatively feminine) response when dealing with stressed citizens, and assumed a demeanour they considered appropriate to their professional role.

There is also research which indicates the extent to which discourse contributes to the construction of gendered workplaces (Holmes and Stubbe 2003a). Many occupations such as IT (Plester and Sayers 2007) and engineering (Bergvall 1996) and their corresponding workplaces are still male-dominated, while areas such as education (Baxter 2003) and nursing (eg Sally Candlin 2002) tend to employ more women, with consequences for the discursive norms constructed in these areas. The gendered nature of discourse in a Danish bakery is described by Nielsen (2008), with women complaining about their exclusion from workplace discourse, while voluntary gender segregation by work shift in a New Zealand bakery enabled women and men to engage in distinctively different styles of gossip (Pilkington 1998). Focussing on a non-western cultural and linguistic context, Philips (2007) describes the ways in which a Tongan women's work group producing decorated bark cloth, a "quintessentially female work activity" (2007: 67), engage in discourse activities which richly enact diverse aspects of Tongan gender ideology. The women's place in Tongan society as well as within a global economy is thus constructed and reinforced both through their work and their talk.

Few studies have explicitly focussed on ethnicity as a component in workplace discourse and this is an area which may be expected to develop in future research. Approaching ethnicity within a constructionist framework involves regarding it as a dynamic and active process enacted in on-going interaction (Blommaert 2005; De Fina 2007). As De Fina suggests, "there are no unified criteria that can universally define ethnic boundaries; rather these are creatively invoked and negotiated by individuals and groups in response to their evolving social roles and circumstances" (2007: 373). While researchers in non-western societies have undertaken valuable research within such a framework, especially on the discourse of women at work (eg. Hall 1995; Besnier 2003; Philips 2007), there is little on the relevance of ethnicity in western work contexts. The LWP team has begun work in this area in the New Zealand context using the concept of the ethnicised workplace or community of practice (Schnurr et al 2008; Holmes, Marra and Schnurr 2008; Holmes et al *fc*), a place where ethnicity acts as a taken-for-granted backdrop, crucial for interpreting everyday communication; ethnic values underpin the guidelines or norms which influence the way

people interact, and the ways in which they construct different aspects of their identity, including their ethnicity. Ethnicity permeates workplace communication in such organisations. This is illustrated in the sample study in the next section which brings together a number of the concepts explored in the preceding sections.

### **A sample case study<sup>iii</sup>**

This section provides a brief case study of Quentin, a senior manager in an “ethnicised community of practice”, a Māori workplace explicitly committed to furthering Māori objectives and promoting Māori values. The study illustrates many of the concepts and dimensions of analysis introduced in the previous discussion including meeting discourse, transactional and relational dimensions of analysis, power and solidarity, and the relevance of gender and ethnicity in the analysis of workplace discourse.

Quentin discursively enacts leadership by consistently providing direction to his team, and identifying clear goals and objectives. But perhaps his most valuable contribution to the organisation lies in his ability to work through the detailed practical steps required to achieve the organisation’s transactional objectives. This practical orientation is evident in his contributions to all meetings, both large and small. Example 1 provides an instance of Quentin’s attention to what can be done to facilitate and speed up progress on a particular project.

#### *Example 1*

*Context:* meeting between Quentin and one of his senior team members

- 1      Quentin:      //I'm just trying to think of ways eh yeah yeah\  
2                      and and and getting value out of the time  
3                      of whether we bring some [professionals] in  
4                      and we have a discussion that we actually record
- 5      Paula:         /oh yeah yeah yeah ways of making it fast  
6                      having a discussion\\ ...
- 7      Quentin:      you know give them that  
8                      [laughs]: I just see that this yeah: yeah yeah  
9                      I'm just thinking of ways in which it might help  
10                     and //then someone\ else can actually start organising the report

- 11                               and then you can just comment on it and say oh well  
12    Paula:                /that's right yes\<\  
13    Quentin:             is that # what do you think is that okay

While clearly enacting leadership by providing direction, the transactional orientation of the discourse is particularly evident in Quentin's specific suggestions for ways of assisting and accelerating progress on the project, and *getting value out of the time* (line 2). He suggests bringing in professionals and making use of their ideas on the basis of *a discussion that we actually record* (line 3-4), as well as using another person to organize the report (line 10), leaving Paula free to *comment on it* (line 11).

Quentin also attends to the relational dimension of workplace talk. His consistently consultative style is evident in the final line of example 1, where he checks that Paula is comfortable with his suggestions: *what do you think is that okay* (line 13). Example 2 provides further evidence as Quentin explains to one of his team members, Renee, how to complete a task for which she is responsible.

#### *Example 2*

*Context:* meeting between Quentin and Renee a junior member of his team. Quentin is describing to her how to do a new administrative task for which she is responsible.

- 1    Quentin:   you know what the guidelines are eh  
2    Renee:     mhm  
3    Quentin:   we do that at the same time  
4    Renee:     mhm  
5    Quentin:   cos this seems to be + this is the first one +  
6               in terms of + from your point of view eh  
7               of understanding //eh yeah entitlement eh\  
8    Renee:     /yeah yeah yeah yeah\<\<

When Renee does not immediately grasp what needs to be done, Quentin patiently repeats aspects of the task more explicitly and in greater detail. He says that he realises this is the first time she has been required to understand this process from a different perspective, namely as the person responsible for administering it (lines 5-7). He provides encouragement and indicates a sympathetic rapport, by checking her understanding throughout, using a range

of pragmatic particles: *okay? you understand? you see what I mean?*, and *eh?*, a distinctively New Zealand pragmatic particle, strongly associated with Māori ethnicity. The particle *eh* (lines 1, 6, 7), in particular, functions to reduce formality and construct rapport. Quentin here enacts a responsive and patient leader-mentor, helping Renee to understand her new task.

Quentin also regularly engages in small talk and jokes with his team (classic relational behaviour), especially before and after team meetings. In example 10, he jokes that another colleague and he want to be additional boyfriends to another employee's girlfriend. The girlfriend's mother brings in lunch for the employee every day and they think it would be nice to get lunch delivered for them too. The team respond positively, and the humour contributes to group cohesion and builds solidarity.

### *Example 3*

*Context:* regular weekly meeting of Quentin's whole team of seven.

Quentin: Jason gets lunch delivered by his girlfriend's mother ...  
so Rangi and I are thinking maybe we should be extra boyfriends

Quentin's interactions illustrate another feature of workplace meetings, discussed above, namely the different ways in which meetings are handled in different communities of practice, and especially by different cultural groups. The CEO of this Māori workplace commented to us that Quentin brought "a sense of ceremony" to events. This was evident in a number of ways. When people came to visit the organisation or when he went out to visit other organisations, Quentin used appropriate formal Māori protocol which paid explicit verbal respect to all those involved. He also consistently greeted and welcomed people formally to any meeting, and he opened and usually closed meetings with a formal, structured *mihi* ('greeting'), paying attention to who was present, their affiliations, their relatives alive and dead, and the *kaupapa* ('agenda') of the meeting (Holmes, Marra and Schnurr 2008). By contrast, meetings in Pākehā organisations typically began with a very brief and informal declaration such as "okay let's get started".

Quentin's enactment of his ethnic identity in his Māori workplace is thus deeply entwined with his role as an undoubted leader in matters relating to Māori culture or *tikanga*. He was clearly identified as the cultural leader by all those who worked with him. His proficiency in the Māori language also meant he could speak for the organisation in Māori contexts when



use of Māori was appropriate. Like a traditional Māori *rangatira* (chief), typically a male role, Quentin “weaves people together” in his workplace, paying attention to their spiritual, relational and material needs.

On the other hand, Māori leaders are also expected to be humble. The important Māori concept of *whakaiti*, i.e., appropriate modesty and humility, is fundamental to understanding the complex ways in which leadership is constructed, especially in the context of large meetings of workplace members (Marra and Holmes 2005, Holmes 2007). The analysis of Quentin’s discourse identified many ways in which he emphasised collegiality and reduced status and power differences, such as the use self-deprecating humour (Holmes 2007), and the extensive use of the colloquial pragmatic tag *eh*, mentioned above, a form that clearly expresses collegiality and emphasizes informality, as well as being strongly associated with Māori ethnicity. Such strategies enabled Quentin to avoid behaving in a way that could be interpreted as unacceptably proud, self-promoting or boastful, and to enact leadership and team membership in ways consistent with Māori cultural attitudes, values and norms.

As mentioned above, there is a much greater use of *te reo* Māori in this workplace than in most New Zealand workplaces, and this is especially true of interactions involving Quentin and his team. Quentin is a fluent Māori speaker and his team members all understand Māori. This means he has an additional resource for enacting ethnicity in workplace interactions. He and his team members frequently code-switched between Māori and English during their meetings, with whole turns often in Māori from some team members (Marra and Kumar 2007). This is important background for understanding why example 4 is regarded as so amusing by Quentin’s team members.

#### *Example 4*

*Context:* regular weekly meeting of Quentin’s team. Quentin is checking their future commitments

- 1     Quentin:     we are at the [technician’s office] through this weekend
- 2                    have I got that day right for you to see Paula
- 3     Paula:        yeah the it’s the Tuesday //the\
- 4     Quentin:     /yeah\\ yeah
- 5     Paula:        not Wednes- you had Tuesday the twenty second
- 6     Quentin:     yeah I know Matariki pointed that out to me

7                                   and it's my it's my calendar  
8                                   I still don't know those days  
9                                   the Māori names for days of the week  
10                                  [general laughter]  
11                                  so I look up and it's the third and I think  
12                                  oh let's move

In this example, Quentin acknowledges that he does not know the (new official) Māori names for the days of the week. To interpret accurately the significance of this admission, it is important to know that fluent Māori speakers such as Quentin learned a version of the days of the week which were transliterations from English (e.g. Mane, Tūrei, Wenerei). In recent years, the Māori Language Commission has been promoting new names for the days of the week, based on diverse and complex sources, both Māori and European (e.g. Rāhina, Rātū, Rāapa), and these are now the “official” versions for use in formal contexts. Thus older fluent Māori speakers may find themselves wrong-footed by newer learners who are familiar with the currently prescribed “official” names.

Hence Quentin is here being self-deprecating in line with Māori values relating to acknowledging fault and being modest. But, ironically, the root cause of the need for modesty is in fact his highly valued and respected expertise and fluent ability in *te reo* Māori. Indeed the laughter that his admission occasions derives precisely from the fact that his team appreciate his outstanding linguistic skills and the humorous irony of his admission.

In a variety of discursive ways then, in both one-to-one interactions and larger meetings, Quentin effectively addresses his organizations distinctive transactional objectives as well as attending to the relational dimension of workplace interaction. Furthermore, he effectively accomplishes leadership through his talk, doing power in ways which enact his Māori identity, whilst also emphasising solidarity in ways compatible with the Māori values which imbue his ethnicised workplace.

## **New directions in workplace discourse research**

The analysis of workplace discourse has developed considerably in terms of data collection sites, methodology, and approaches to analysis over the last thirty years. It seems likely that there will continue to be developments in all three areas in the next twenty years.

Workplace data collected in the 1970's tended to be mainly institutional data, often involving one-to-one interactions between professionals and clients. Workplace sites have expanded to include a much wider range of professional white-collar contexts, including government organisations and private companies, with large group meetings a common focus. It seems likely that there will be developments which will encompass data collection in small meetings, as well as perhaps more of the small talk and social interaction which takes place at work.

As will be apparent, few researchers have ventured into blue collar worksites; they tend to be noisy and dirty and often rather uncomfortable places for academics undertaking research (but see Goldstein 1997; Holmes and Stubbe 2003a; Sunaoshi 2005; Baxter and Wallace 2009). Nonetheless, this is undoubtedly another direction in which it is important to expand workplace discourse research. Similarly, there is little evidence other than hearsay on the interactional norms of skilled workers such as plumbers, painters, and electricians. This also suggests that the definition of what counts as a workplace would benefit from further reflection, perhaps expanding to encompass more mobile sites such as the workspaces of professional sports teams (Wilson *fc*) and travelling salespeople.

Research on workplace discourse will inevitably extend to embrace ways of collecting more multi-modal data and corresponding multimodal analysis (eg. Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001; Scollon 2005; Norris 2005; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear and Leu 2009). Already some researchers have devised satisfactory ways of video-recording a range of workplace interactions. As technology improves and data collection devices become less intrusive, this will become standard. Correspondingly, workplace research could fruitfully develop in more interdisciplinary directions, with greater collaboration between scholars in discourse analysis and other disciplines such as business communication, leadership and media studies, and communication (see Roberts and Sarangi 2003). Again there is some evidence of this already but there is scope for considerably more. And finally, there is scope for discourse analysts to develop greater reflexivity in their research methodologies (Sarangi and Candlin 2003) and an increased sensitivity to the needs and expectations of those they work with. In sum, there

is much exciting work ahead, extending directions already apparent and developing new and innovative ways of analysing workplace discourse.

## Key Readings

- Baxter, Judith A. 2008. Is it all tough talking at the top? A post-structuralist analysis of the construction of gendered speaker identities of British business leaders within interview narratives. *Gender and Language* 2(2), 197-222. Illustrates post-structuralist approach, uses interview method and includes useful analysis of gender and narrative.
- Boxer, Dianne 2002. *Applying Sociolinguistics*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. Relevant chapter on workplace discourse
- Holmes, Janet and Maria Stubbe 2003. *Power and Politeness in the Workplace: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Talk at Work*. London: Longman. Chapter 6 on humour to illustrate our approach
- Koester, Almut 2006. *Investigating Workplace Discourse*. London: Routledge. Chapter 2 on approaches to analysis of workplace discourse
- Mills, Sara and Kate Beeching (eds.) 2006. *Journal of Politeness Research* 2,1. Special issue. Politeness at Work. Focusses on how politeness is accomplished in a wide variety of different workplace contexts, including meetings and service encounters.
- Spencer-Oatey, Helen and Jianyu Xing 2008. Issues of face in a Chinese business visit to Britain. In Helen Spencer-Oatey (ed.), *Culturally Speaking: Managing Rapport Through Talk* (pp. 391-416). London: Continuum.

## Transcription conventions

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <u>yes</u>       | Underlining indicates emphatic stress  |
| [laughs] : :     | Paralinguistic features and other information in square brackets, colons indicate start/finish |
| +                | Pause of up to one second  |
| ... //.....\ ... | Simultaneous speech  |
| .../.....\\ ...  |  |
| -                | Incomplete or cut-off utterance  |
| ... ..           | Section of transcript omitted  |
| #                | Signals end of "sentence" where it is ambiguous on paper                                       |

All names are pseudonyms

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#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> A briefer version of this paper will appear in Ken Hyland and Brian Paltridge (eds) *Continuum Companion to Discourse Analysis*. London: Continuum. I would like to express appreciation to Sharon Marsden and Meredith Marra who assisted with the literature review on which this paper is based.

<sup>ii</sup> See Stubbe, Lane, Hilder, E. Vine, B. Vine, Marra, Holmes and Weatherall (2003) for an illustration of the results of a range of analytical approaches to one excerpt of workplace discourse. Sarangi and Roberts (1999) also include very valuable discussion of methodological issues.

<sup>iii</sup> This section draws on Holmes (2009).