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12. INTERPERSONAL PRAGMATICS AND WORKPLACE INTERACTION

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1. Introduction

While it may seem a given that interest in studies on workplace interaction centres on information flow, decision making, best practices and optimising business, scholars have long pointed out that how these results are achieved contains an interpersonal and relational dimension that is just as important as business facts and figures. Over the last few decades, pioneering work by Janet Holmes on the role of gender, humour, power, and the impact of deeply ingrained cultural understandings of what it means to 'do business' have been key in developing this interface of studies on the workplace and interpersonal pragmatics. We take this chapter as an opportunity to explore the connection between interpersonal pragmatics and linguistic studies on the workplace by focusing on a core business event: the meeting. In Section 2 we will set the scene by reviewing literature on interpersonal issues in connection with politeness research, workplace interaction and its connection to interpersonal pragmatics, and finally, we will turn to meetings as the particular focus for illustration. Section 3 will illustrate pertinent interpersonal concerns in meetings from two different organisations and Section 4 will provide conclusions and an outlook for future research.

2. Background: Exploring the interface of interpersonal pragmatics and workplace sociolinguistics

2.1 *(Im)politeness studies, relational work and interpersonal pragmatics*

The study of (im)politeness has been a constant research theme in linguistics since the 1970s. The influential work by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) occupies a prominent position amongst politeness theories and has been adopted to ask questions about how women and men do politeness, how power is enacted, and how this pans out in the workplace. Holmes was amongst the first to engage with Brown and Levinson's framework in the context of the workplace (see e.g. Holmes 1995), paving the way for further studies in the late 1990s. These studies provided evidence of the subtleties of relational work. Holmes soon moved to a more dynamic approach for the study of gender and language, as well as power and language in the workplace (see Holmes 2006). The influential *Power and Politeness in the Workplace* (Holmes and Stubbe 2003) and the launch of the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) were landmark events for the then newly established field. Holmes and her team are open to exploring the ways in which language and power are employed in doing business, and what kind of effects the chosen strategies have on the business outcomes (e.g. how decisions are being made) and the understanding of roles (e.g. how gender or ethnicity is enacted, challenged and confirmed).

In the 2000s, the discursive approaches to (im)politeness phenomena reminded us of the fluidity and changeability of norms that are at the base of judgements about (im)politeness, while at the same time endorsing the idea that people make their decisions against the backdrop of having been socialised into these very same cultural norms (for overviews, see Locher 2014, 2015). For example, the work of Holmes and her colleagues shows nicely how the Pākehā and Māori ways of doing meetings differ, and how their separate expectations need to be negotiated in mixed teams (Holmes, Marra and Schnurr 2008; Holmes and Stubbe 2003).

In this chapter, 'interpersonal pragmatics' is an approach to the study of language in use that is particularly interested in the

relational side of interaction (Locher and Graham 2010), and 'relational work' describes the work that people invest in shaping relationships (Locher and Watts 2005). Relational work has its origins in (im)politeness research and is closely related to identity construction, in the sense that it shapes identities. In line with the discourse approach to workplace studies, we see interaction as social practice, and workplace talk as doing work. At any workplace, business is done by individuals with different positions (and associated rights and obligations) in the workplace hierarchy. The way these positions are enacted, however, depends on the dominant norms of each workplace and how they are negotiated by its actors. Employees scrutinise the status quo as part of daily routines and practices, and negotiate what is acceptable, appropriate, good or bad, and so on. We can then easily see why Holmes's work early on brought the fields of workplace studies and (im)politeness research together.

2.2 *Workplace interaction and why it is relevant to study it from an interpersonal pragmatics perspective*

The globalised nature of economic activity, team-based structures, and the application of technology have changed the way we conceptualise and do work. Many employees in all sectors are expected to cross linguistic, geographical, professional and organisational boundaries as part of their daily routine at work, and to successfully navigate these crossings in the context of high-stakes activities. These crossings are enacted linguistically, which makes the workplace a rich research site for linguists in general, and for workplace applied linguists and sociolinguists in particular. Current work in the field pays attention to boundaries and crossings, either between or within languages, countries, time zones or professional identities (Angouri, Marra and Holmes 2017). Although mobility has been associated with large multinationals or specific types of (mainly white collar) professions, the global economy has had an influence on all workplaces, and binaries of the past (such as big/small, white collar/blue collar, public/private, monolingual/multilingual) are increasingly blurred (see Angouri and Piekkari in press). In the current context of migration, or the so-called

'refugee crisis' (for critical discussions see Wodak 2016), the issue of workforce mobility and access to the labour market is topical and timely. This is reflected in the increasing number of critical studies on topics such as the commodification of language and human capital, the relationship between multilingualism and social justice, and the process of negotiating gatekeeping events (e.g. job interviews, see Duchêne and Heller 2012; Roberts 2003; Sarangi and Roberts 1999). What is relevant to this chapter is that newcomers to a setting go through a process of acquiring local meanings and dominant ways of doing and, in turn, scrutinise and perpetuate or resist them. This process of 'fitting in' is enacted in everyday professional routines and often goes unnoticed (Angouri 2018), but professional roles and identities are enacted in the local context, and successfully negotiating being 'one of us' is locally achieved in interaction. This has been the focus of workplace sociolinguists for over three decades.

Discovering, exploring, fulfilling and challenging expectations about roles and norms of conduct is also a classic topic of pragmatics (i.e. the study of language in use in particular social contexts). Politeness research and interpersonal pragmatics are especially concerned with the relational aspect of language, notably the ways in which linguistic variation can be explained by people adapting to situations with respect to the particular norms of the community and the distance and power relations between the interactants. In workplace interactions where people convene with particular pre-assigned roles that entail particular rights and obligations (e.g. chair, secretary), it is especially interesting to explore how relational work is used to 'get business done'.

Workplace sociolinguistics has grown exponentially over the past 30 years and for many, including many of the contributors in this volume, it constitutes a field in its own right. Workplace sociolinguists, in line with the priorities of the broader disciplinary area, have a strong interest in language used in different contexts and the social meaning associated with interactants' language choices and other semiotic resources mobilised in interaction. It is *through* and *in* interaction that the workplace participants enact their own professional roles and identities within the context of their

organisation and simultaneously, by the same process, construct the organisation itself. For workplace sociolinguists, the workplace is not only its material instantiation – it is particularly the discourse that 'makes' the organisation. The organisation emerges in and through the discourse of the participants. This position is in line with the discourse turn in organisation studies and current work on sense-making (Alvesson 2004; Vaara 2000; Weick 1995).

These claims are, by now, well supported by a range of studies in the field; however, this was not the case when sociolinguists turned their attention to the significance of 'talk at work' and the intertwined relationship between task-oriented and social talk. In this context, work by Holmes and her colleagues paved the way for studying the organisation in and as interaction. They particularly focused on the structure of business events, as well as the nuanced ways in which professional identity and leadership, humour and politeness, or fitting in and belonging (amongst others) is actively done.

The focus on language as social practice is also well reflected in the wide adoption of the Communities of Practice (CofP) theoretical framework, which provides the means to study the link between local practices and the wider business context. Such an approach is particularly good at capturing the ways in which individuals construct their membership of certain groups through their language use. Wenger (1998: 73) identifies three core dimensions of a CofP:

- a) what it is about – its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members;
- b) how it functions – mutual engagement that bind[s] members together into a social entity; and
- c) what capability it has produced – the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time.

It is (c) in particular that allowed workplace sociolinguists and applied linguists to show how communities construct distinct identities in discourse. At the same time, the CofP framework provided a vocabulary to articulate the relationship between the situated practice in the 'here and now' of talk and the structures

that pre-exist the individual actors. To combine the notion of CofP with interpersonal pragmatics was thus an easy step to **make** (see Locher 2008: 520 for an overview), since it allows us to combine the interest in the local negotiation of practices with how these practices tie into larger societal ideologies and are instantiated in identity construction.

The workplace as a research site is notoriously difficult to access, and issues of confidentiality are paramount. For workplace discourse analysts, obtaining access to real life data is even more challenging than using other tools such as interviews or questionnaires. The methodology used by Holmes and her colleagues, which gave control of the data collection to the participants, has made a significant impact in the field. Anchored in the collection of naturally occurring workplace interaction, it has been adopted and adapted by researchers in different parts of the world. Linguists interested in the relationship between language and culture (see e.g. Clyne 1994) and wishing to follow the principles of appreciative inquiry draw on a range of approaches, such as interactional sociolinguistics and the legacy of John Gumperz (e.g. 1999), the ethnographic tradition of Dell Hymes (1974), seminal work in the field by conversation analysts (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992) and discourse analysis (e.g. Sarangi and Roberts 1999). Holmes in particular takes a problem-driven approach and carries out research *with* (as opposed to *for* or *on*) professionals (e.g. Holmes, Marra and Vine 2011). Following the same principles, and as a result of systematic discourse analysis of workplace data, researchers showed systematic and consistent patterns in the structure of formal and informal business events, as well as the ways in which managing interpersonal relationships is a core part of managing professional tasks. We will return to this point in the light of the data.

2.3 Meeting talk

Workplace discourse analysts have spent considerable time in the study of the language of meetings. The prevalence and significance of meetings in any type of professional environment makes them ideal for the study of pragmatic language varieties people use at work, as well as the ways in which professional roles and identities

are enacted in and through meeting discourse. Starting with the event itself: there have been a number of different attempts to classify what counts as a meeting in different contexts. Some have focused on the number of participants, the aims, or the place and time of the gathering (e.g. Schwartzman 1989). For each categorisation, however, one can find an equal number of studies showing that some or all of the criteria do not apply. In what constitutes a very flexible definition, Cuff and Sharrock (1985) suggested that the meeting participants 'commonsensically' recognise a meeting by its context. Although their approach has been criticised for being broad and hence analytically limited, it shows that the form of a meeting may vary significantly but still be recognisable to its attendees.

Studies have shown that despite local variation, there are certain characteristics that differentiate the meeting from other work-related events. Specifically, the openings of meetings, in terms of function and form and the pre-allocation of turns to the meeting chair (Barnes 2007; Boden 1994; Handford 2010) or the meeting agenda, have been referred to as the meeting's 'structural devices' (Orlikowski and Yates 1994: 544) – features which provide meetings with a distinguishable form. Barnes (2007) has also argued that it is the distribution of turns that makes a meeting a recognisable event (also Larrue and Trognon 1993). Although variation on the form is common, the participants orient towards the same activities in the workplaces we analysed and associate the meeting with a task-oriented event that presents some or all the characteristics identified above (Angouri and Marra 2010). The strength of the pattern can be seen in data collected across the world, with evidence of similar patterns in Hong Kong (Rogerson-Revell 1999), Norway (Svennevig 2012), Denmark (Nielsen 2009) and the United Kingdom (Koester 2010).

Elsewhere a claim was made for a meeting genre (Angouri and Marra 2011) and this is still on the agenda of current research (Kim forthcoming). This does not mean that meeting enactment does not vary. Sociolinguistic work has shown that CofPs orient towards distinct norms in doing work in general, and in meeting talk in particular (Angouri and Mondada 2017). The micro norms (developed over time by a particular team), however, are

not independent of the macro norms (e.g. the company's norms). Put differently, individuals come together in collective groupings that may or may not form a CofP, as defined above, and develop distinct ways of doing things over time. CofPs, in turn, form larger collective groupings where the norms of practice are negotiated at a macro-level. This dynamic process is discussed by Wenger (1998: 131), who argues that these two levels 'always co-exist and shape each other'. Hence, although local variation is noted, there is consistency in the structure of the meeting event or the discourse strategies used by the interactants in managing talk in the meeting context.

The use of 'common sense' in the definition of meeting proposed by Cuff and Sharrock (1985) is significant. Critical discourse analysts have shown how 'common sense' works on the basis of established hegemonies in different contexts (Wodak 2000, 2009). In relation to the meeting event, 'common sense' representations suggest a dominant prototype visible in any organisation. Hegemonies allude to power hierarchies, and the 'meeting' is also a site of power struggle (Wodak 2000, 2009). In line with earlier work, we define the meeting as a broad term which 'cover[s] heterogeneous gatherings in which people meet for professional and institutional purposes and work together on a common task and goal' (Angouri and Mondada 2017; Angouri 2018). This common goal does not suggest equal power or lack of personal agendas. The meeting provides space for negotiating rights and responsibilities, which is achieved by and reflected in turn-taking choices and access to the floor. In the meeting event, the participants jointly construct new knowledge for the organisation and reaffirm shared meanings in relation to routine activities and behaviours. This is directly related to issues of power and solidarity, as Wodak (2012) has shown. The business meeting provides the context for negotiating professional identities and perpetuating or resisting the power im/balance within a professional setting. This is not only on the basis of what is said in the meeting event. Managing the distribution of turns, keeping/taking the floor, and including or excluding others to achieve one's own goals, are significant aspects of participating in meeting talk, and they involve working

within the norms of the various communities of practice as well as negotiating ways to challenge them and establish new ones. This is managed interactionally and skilfully in line with the roles and responsibilities of the interactants. The analysis of the relational work we all do as a matter of course at work provides an insight into this complexity.

Our own research on disagreement (Angouri and Locher 2012) has discussed the complexities of interpersonal dynamics in negotiating this speech act. We found that different communities orient towards different ways of doing disagreement and that disagreement, while potentially face-threatening, is often an expected activity in decision making and problem solving. In two papers on business interaction, Angouri (2012) and Marra (2012) report that negatively marked talk is actively avoided or sanctioned as inappropriate, despite the fact that different expectations apply as to the form of negatively marked instances of talk. Workplaces differ in their tolerance of directness, swearing or banter. In line with this view, Vine's (2004) research on directives has also shown the importance of the interactional context for the form and function of issuing directives in workplace talk. Workplace interactants draw on a range of strategies in either enforcing a power imbalance or resisting it. Work on humour in the workplace (e.g. Holmes and Marra 2002) has shown the effect of banter and laughter in managing potential face loss. It is through strategic use of humour and situated linguistic choices that participants align or disalign to the norms of a team and claim/project membership to different work communities.

In *Power and Politeness* (2003), Holmes and Stubbe engage with different workplaces and discuss the pragmatic effect of language features. Drawing on the largest purposefully collected corpus of workplace interactions, the book illustrates a range of issues that remain at the forefront of debates in the field. Some of the cases included in the publication became particularly visible to the field as illustrating power and politeness at work. The example below is from the opening of the book, where we join Clara and her team in a decision-making episode related to a software product (for full analysis see Holmes and Stubbe 2003: 1ff).

Example 1 (Holmes and Stubbe 2003:1)

Context: Regular weekly meeting of project team in white-collar, commercial organisation [in New Zealand].

- 1 Harry: Look's [sic] like there's been actually a request for screendumps
 2 I know it was outside of the scope
 3 but people will be pretty worried about it
 4 Clara: no screendumps
 5 Matt: we-
 6 Clara: no screendumps
 7 Peg: [sarcastically] thank you Clara
 8 Clara: /no screendumps\
 9 Rob: /we know\ we know you didn't want them and we um er /we've\
 10 Clara: /that does not\ meet the criteria
 [several reasons provided why screendumps should be allowed]
 11 Clara: thanks for looking at that though
 12 Sandy: so that's a clear well maybe no
 13 Clara: It's a no
 14 Sandy: It's a no a royal no
 15 Clara: did people feel disempowered by that decision
 16 Peg: [sarcastically] no
 17 Clara: [laughs]

Clara's direct way of managing the floor is striking in this excerpt. While normative representations of politeness suggest that down-toning rejections of requests is common, Clara is issuing a directive and firmly closes the discussion on the matter. She controls the floor and constructs herself in a senior position that comes with decision ratification entitlement (Angouri and Angelidou 2012). The repetition of 'no screendumps' in line 8 is indicative of Clara's positioning and indexes an authoritarian style in this specific interactional moment. As Holmes and Stubbe's analysis argues, however, this takes a different layer of meaning when it is placed in the context of a team that has been working together over a period of time, has developed

specific ways of 'doing' meetings and is tolerant to directness. Clara's turn does not seem to be perceived as inappropriate, as the uptake shows. The team works together to 'offset' any face risk. As Clara manages the topic, the team forms an alliance and manages Clara. Rob, Peg and Sandy's turns use humour to minimise any potential risk to the interpersonal bonds. Clara's turns in line 15 and 16 also tone down the directness and acknowledge the work of the team. Her own contribution to the humorous episode and the play with disempowerment successfully conclude the matter.

Holmes and Stubbe's analysis usefully shows how speaking styles can only be understood in relation to the context within which the speakers operate. As a consequence, general guidelines about what managers do or do not do (or should not do) are analytically limiting. For example, the references to a 'royal no' (line 14) and the 'queen' (not shown here) draw on past episodes known to the participants, and allow the team to both minimise the effect of a 'no' in turn-initial position and to manage Clara's controlling the decision-making process. The ways this is enacted are related to historicities and past decisions made by the team. Seniority, hierarchy and organisational practices are enacted on a turn-by-turn basis, and hence an interactional approach can shed light on the process by which employees negotiate relationships and ways of doing business. We discuss this further in the next section.

3. Illustration of pertinent relational issues with data from meetings

In this section we discuss excerpts illustrating mundane procedural matters in two different organisations. Our aim is to show pragmatic variability in task negotiation and how this is related to interpersonal issues.

Example 2 illustrates one of the distinguishing characteristics of the meeting event: the opening. The enactment of organisational roles and the variation in the forms that meeting openings take have been discussed in a range of papers by LWP colleagues and others (see e.g. Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1999: 360; Kangasharju 1996; Locher 2004: 265). Unlike stereotypical representations of meeting talk, where the openings are shown as explicit announcements of the

agenda and purpose of the meetings, work by Holmes and colleagues (Holmes and Stubbe 2003) has shown that there is also variability due to dominant norms associated with ethnic communities in New Zealand: Māori teams typically start meetings with social talk about family members before moving to business items, while Pākehā teams typically focus more quickly on the business-related tasks. This difference reflects a different orientation to the understanding of team members' roles. Research by Angouri and Marra (2010) has also shown that there can be considerable pragmatic variation in fulfilling the tasks of chairs: participants draw on local knowledge and norms shared between the interactants to deviate from the stereotypical expectation. Angouri and Marra (2010) draw on different data sets from different organisations and in different industries, and show that despite variation in form, the chair role function is stable in the data set. Example 2 shows such an event (see also Holmes et al. 2011; Holmes forthcoming).

Example 2 (For a discussion of similar excerpts see Angouri and Marra 2011)

Context: A meeting in a multinational company – English is the official language. We join an established team at the very beginning of a meeting chaired by Peter. Peter opens the meeting with a notional head count.

- 1 Peter: is everybody [here]
- 2 John: [no] alex is out but he is coming
- 3 Peter: can we start then ↑
- 4 Sam: and james pete is not here but he is coming as well
- 5 Peter: okay hmm then let's wait ahh ((alex enters))
- 6 okay now that alex is here let's start
- 7 and james will be here shortly
- 8 first of all i need to ask if you need any more space
- 9 for all the equipment that you bring here

Once the information on the headcount is provided by John, Peter starts with the first item on the agenda (line 8), i.e. the issue of sufficient space for equipment on the construction worksite that the

team is currently working on. The agenda is known to the participants but this is not made explicit here. From an interpersonal pragmatics perspective, we can posit that this is a tightly knit community of practice and they favour a direct style. This is evidenced here by Peter moving quickly to the first item. Peter does not provide any background information, instead clearly relying on the shared knowledge of the participants. Repeating known information is unnatural; the participants are familiar with the agenda in general and the issue of 'space' and equipment is recurrent in relation to works on their site. On the other hand, ratifying the agenda would be necessary if it was not known (or circulated) to the participants in advance.

Similarly, a collaborative turn-taking style is evidenced by an open floor, where participants contribute depending on a dynamic negotiation of their roles and responsibilities instead of a rigid floor management by the chair. This is also shown in Example 3, which is drawn from a different company in the UK.

Example 3 (for a full analysis see Angouri 2018)

Context: A meeting in a small organisation – English is the official language. Earlier in the same meeting the participants have decided to run a conference, and they are now discussing publicity. James introduces the suggestion of putting together a flyer. There are five people in the room.

- 1 James: so do we need to get a flyer done ↑
- 2 Sam: ((3 sec)) yea
- 3 James: then we need to get that done pretty soon
- 4 Lisa: soon
- 5 James: can you get that done by when, by end september at the latest ↑
- 6 Sam: i just need two days (.) i mean i don't think it's about what it looks like
- 7 (.) [. .] it's three times more effective to lead with a phone call and then
- 8 follow up
- 9 James: so why don't – who's (.) going to do it then ↑
- 10 Lisa: i'm quite happy to do
- 11 the phone calls (.) it would be nice to get some sort of not script (.) [. .]
- 12 Sam: i know that's what paul and i will coordinate, if i trash down some

- 13 bullet points to you, and then we can let lisa have it by the end of the
 14 week if that's okay with you [right okay]
 15 Paul: [okay right] i'm not around at all [. . .] i'm
 16 in the car
 17 Sam: okay um (.) i can try and do something at the weekend [. . .]
 18 Lisa: yea (.) just you know few bullet points of the key questions and what i
 19 have to tell them

James, the chair of the meeting and director of the company, introduces a suggestion for 'getting the word out' about the conference the team decided to run earlier in the meeting. James opens the floor to the other participants and only contributes minimally (see line 1) which is often a sign of 'doing power' in the meeting event (Holmes and Stubbe 2003). Sam's endorsement and Lisa's echoing of James (line 4) contribute to the confirmation of the decision to go ahead with the flyer idea. James, by way of ratification (line 3), sets the time frame (line 5), and Lisa supports him, forming a locally situated alliance. For the rest of the meeting, Sam and Lisa develop the issue further and discuss the details, which involve a series of decisions for the team's next steps. Sam suggests a course of action (line 12), which is later ratified by James (not given here), and Lisa (line 18) takes on the task of making the phone calls. The enactment of this simple decision, of producing publicity in the form of the flyer, is being modified by the participants, and the originally agreed flyer morphs into an email and phone call invitation in the course of the episode. In line with other research on decision making (Huisman 2001), this excerpt also shows how even simple decisions are subject to detailed discussion, elaboration and investigation by the meeting participants.

Turning to interpersonal pragmatics, we can now explore the relational component of the interaction. This CofP favours what they perceive as a flat structure, where participants contribute on equal footing in the decision making. At the same time, however, James's role as the most senior person is clearly enacted in the excerpt, offering a parallel to Clara's case in Example 1. James issues directives, mitigated as questions (e.g. line 5), in constructing his

role. Similarly, the seniority of all the participants becomes clear as the interaction unfolds. Both Louise and Sam take ownership of the dissemination task and actively contribute in finalising the details. Paul makes a brief contribution to show his willingness to 'chip in', in response to Sam's task delegation (line 15); however, as he is not immediately available to work on the draft he seems to be quietly excluded by Sam and Louise. Sam is successfully taking ownership of the decisions made in this excerpt as he suggests a course of action and also delegates tasks. James takes a back seat and does not claim the floor back while Louise and Sam develop the agenda, and at the end of the episode Sam moves the discussion back to the content of the conference. Overall, the excerpt is collaborative and fast paced (see frequent latching), and there is agreement as to the overall task (publicity for the event) and the way this can be achieved.

This is a small team working closely together and the collaborative management of the floor indicates the strong interpersonal relationships. Overlapping is common in their meetings and poses no threat to their management of work and social talk, as can be seen by the uptake. Roles and areas of responsibility are constructed in this process and the participants self/other allocate tasks and accountability for the outcome. Overall, the analysis of the two excerpts illustrates the significance of the local context for the enactment of routine practices. Employees negotiate and adapt ways of doing according to the norms of their teams, as well as their own understanding of what is desirable, appropriate and strategic, in order to achieve their goals. The management of interpersonal dynamics is central in this process.

4. Concluding remarks

The combination of interpersonal pragmatics with workplace sociolinguistics allows scholars to zoom in on pragmatic variability in seemingly similar activities. In other words, while there is a 'common sense' understanding of what a meeting entails, which people orient to, we nevertheless find variability in how tasks are executed. This variability can be meaningfully explored when taking the notion of Community of Practice on board and combining it with an understanding that communication is not only about

factual information exchange but also about relationship creation and negotiation. The discussion of the three examples in this chapter has shown that the histories of the team members' relationships and the norms of the CofP play crucial roles in determining how they go about doing their business. Just as the pioneering work by Holmes and her colleagues has argued, consideration of power, language, and cultural context shape the norms of a community of practice and identity construction. In order to meaningfully explore workplace discourse, further research is needed into how macro categories are made locally relevant and for what purpose.

To conclude, interpersonal pragmatics and interactional sociolinguistics has undoubtedly provided us with theoretical and methodological tools that have allowed insight into the nuances of workplace talk and the ways in which the interactants skilfully manage social and professional agendas. The world of work is changing: employees change jobs and careers much more than in the past; teams are becoming multiprofessional, and often collaborate in virtual spaces, at the interface of time and geographical zones. This modern workplace challenges the way our tools can capture and analyse the complexity of 'what is going on'. The field of workplace discourse has come of age and is now in a position to critically engage with core concepts and theoretical and methodological traditions that have been dominant in our work. Work by Holmes and her colleagues continues to sit at the forefront of these debates and pushes the agenda for a dynamic, multimethod, multimodal analysis of interpersonal aspects of the workplace.

Transcription conventions

Example 1: the original was kept (see Holmes and Stubbe 2003)
 Examples 2 and 3: a simplified version of the Jeffersonian transcription system was used (see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974)

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13. LEADERSHIP AND SELF-DENIGRATING HUMOUR: AN OXYMORON?

Stephanie Schnurr and Angela C. K. Chan

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we discuss the close link between leadership and self-denigrating humour, and explore some of the diverse functions this relatively inconspicuous type of humour may perform in workplace contexts around the world. The various benefits of humour at work more broadly, and for leadership in particular, are well established (e.g. Avolio, Howell and Sosik 1999; Baxter 2010; Goleman 2003; Holmes 2007; Holmes and Marra 2006; Hopton, Barling and Turner 2013; Schnurr 2009). Previous research has identified and described some of the ways in which leaders in a range of different workplaces in different socio-cultural contexts draw on humour to achieve their various objectives – transactional, as well as relational – often simultaneously (e.g. Holmes, Schnurr and Marra 2007; Marra, Schnurr and Holmes 2006; Mullany 2007; Schnurr 2008, 2009; Schnurr and Chan 2009, 2011). Humour is a valuable discursive strategy frequently used by leaders to get things done, and to mitigate criticism, disagreements, and other potentially face-threatening acts. It may also help leaders to manage and avoid conflict, release tension, and gain compliance from their subordinates. Moreover, humour is an excellent means for bonding, creating and enhancing solidarity, and expressing in-group

LINGUIST AT WORK

FESTSCHRIFT FOR JANET HOLMES

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Meredith Marra and Paul Warren

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