

Swings and roundabouts: getting things done at work¹

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Introduction

The Language in the Workplace Project team has investigated talk in New Zealand workplaces from a number of different perspectives.² These include analyses of the functions of humour (Holmes 1998b, Marra this volume); the use of small talk (Holmes in press); the use of directives (Vine and Marra 1998); the ways in which people use language to construct their professional and social identities at work (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine in press, Stubbe in press); and the discourse processes of problem-solving interactions and meetings (Stubbe forthcoming). While each of these studies focuses on a specific aspect of workplace discourse, taken collectively they also consistently highlight the impossibility of matching a single communicative function to a given linguistic strategy or form. In this paper we apply a framework for analysing workplace talk which takes explicit account of the complex relationship between the form and function(s) of utterances, and use it to illustrate how participants in workplace interactions exploit the multi-functionality of utterances to achieve their interactional goals.³

Analytic framework

In examining the ways in which participants used language to get things done in the workplace, we found it useful to consider three different levels of analysis: speech functions (or groups of speech acts), discourse strategies, and linguistic forms. These categories are not always clearly distinguishable, but are nevertheless useful as a way of teasing out different kinds of relationship between form and function.

First, a speech act or function may be realised by two or more strategies or linguistic forms, sometimes in separate contexts, sometimes concurrently. For example, the speech act 'apology' may be expressed using a strategy of 'expressing regret' and realised by the linguistic form *sorry*. Or an apology might be expressed by a strategy of 'providing an excuse' and realised through the linguistic form *my computer crashed last night* (see Holmes 1998a). The speech act "order" may be realised at the second level

¹ This article is based on two related presentations given by the authors during a symposium on Language in the Workplace at the Sixth New Zealand Language and Society Conference.

² See Holmes (this volume), Stubbe 1998 for details.

³ See Holmes (1998a) and Holmes, Stubbe and Vine (in press), for a more detailed discussion of this model.

by a discourse strategy such as an illocutionary force indicating device (IFID, Searle 1976), which might be realised linguistically with an expression such as *I insist that you....* or *I seriously suggest that you....* The speech act 'agree' may be realised by the pragmatic strategy 'positive feedback', and one or more of the linguistic forms *mm, right, yes*. Clearly, any particular speech act will tend to be expressible through a finite number of discourse strategies, and each strategy will be realisable by a finite (though often extremely large) variety of linguistic forms.

Conversely, a given speech act, discourse strategy or form may have a number of different functions. Our data provides a wealth of examples of this point. Managers would often use humour to soften a criticism or a direct instruction, while one of their staff members might make a joke or humorous remark which functioned as an indirect challenge or disagreement. A worker talking to a manager used small talk as a strategy for leading into a request for a day off, while another manager used it as a way of finding out politely whether a worker was planning to take leave during the school holidays without directly seeking the information. One team adopted a linear, 'one-at-a-time' style for a weekly update meeting, where overlapping speech functioned mainly as a turn-competitive device. The same group adopted a much looser structure for a meeting to brainstorm a new policy initiative; in this case overlaps more often provided supportive feedback and signalled high involvement in the discussion.

All these examples illustrate the notion of stylistic flexibility: namely, people have a range of interactional resources at their disposal for meeting their goals, and they continually select from their linguistic repertoire according to the particular context in which they find themselves. These points are explored in more detail below with reference to two related sets of speech acts, directives and seeking/giving advice, both of which involve getting others to do something.

Directives

When speakers want others to do things how do they convey this? 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, as the degree of imposition was greater. 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 make use of negative politeness strategies, 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, eg., *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 (cf Jones 1992). The use of modals and hedged syntactic structures as in "I wondered if you wouldn't mind", *what we might need* and the use of an illocutionary force indicating device *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 epistemic 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.

Giving/seeking advice

The speech acts of giving and seeking advice recur frequently in our dataset, and like directives, are realised by various strategies and forms. It is relatively straightforward to identify instances of advice-giving or -seeking, defined here as speech acts which overtly provide or seek to obtain help or suggestions. However, on closer analysis, these speech acts often turn out to be functionally very complex, themselves serving as strategies for achieving a range of discourse goals, instead of or as well as their basic meaning. For instance, advice-seeking often functions affectively as a device for creating solidarity or goodwill, or interactionally, as in the following excerpt, as a strategy for opening a topic for discussion:

Barbara, a policy adviser talking to Ruth, a manager

Barb: hey Ruth, I've got a little problem

Ruth: yeah? what with?

Barb: well I was just sending you a complicated email
but if you've got ten minutes-

Advice-seeking can also function as a covert strategy for complaining or expressing disagreement, for negotiating a position, deflecting a criticism or making a request. In the next example, Claire is talking to Tom, a senior manager. She is aggrieved at his decision to pass her over for promotion, and has requested a meeting to discuss the issue. However, she frames her opening remarks, not as a complaint, but as a request for advice on a personal issue, thus mitigating the potential face threat of a more direct approach and acknowledging that Tom is not obliged to justify his decision to her. Tom clearly hears the complaint implicit in Claire's remarks, as he responds, not with advice, but with an explanation of why she was passed over for the job:

Claire: yeah I want to talk to you about um oh it's a personal issue um + well
the decision to make Jared acting manager while Joseph is away +
and I wanted to get some well

Tom: mm

Claire: I've been overlooked quite a few times /but\ I wanted to find out

Tom: /mm\

Claire: specifically how what I could do to help myself be considered next
time....

Advice-giving also often functions to create goodwill, but because all advice

potentially carries connotations of superior knowledge, it is potentially face-threatening, and may also function to reinforce or challenge power differences. On the other hand, in contexts where status differences are clearly understood, or between equals, advice-giving is a common strategy for delivering an indirect directive, as in the following example:

Jan, a manager, is discussing workload issues with Harry, a team leader

Harry: ..but I'm keeping the pressure on [laughs] + actually I wanted to get your advice about that.....I want to say ...unfortunately this is the nature of it and you're going to have to work nights and compromise your weekends and things like that....

Jan: although I mean I can appreciate that sort of message but on the other hand don't sort of say that as something that should be the norm like that's really you know when things are really from time to time that it's not a good way of them expecting to organise their work all the time

Here Jan's heavily mitigated directive speech act is framed overtly as a response to Harry's request for advice. It is quite clear that Jan does not want Harry to proceed with his proposed course of action; her indirect directive provides a face-saving formula for Harry, who has already had to defend his team's recent poor performance.

In the following excerpt, on the other hand, advice-giving provides an indirect strategy for declining to cooperate with an indirect directive:

Bruce comes over to Brenda's desk carrying some documents

Brenda: hello Bruce [laughs] oh no don't ask me about that funding ...I don't know anything about it [laughs]...

Bruce: Yvette gave me these and said um our section's supposed to be doing something with these—but we haven't been and er she said you might know something about them so to come and have a chat to you

Brenda: well no this one here our section have had nothing to do with it ...I wonder if anyone in X might know something about it? you might have a quick chat to Liam there... but we've definitely done nothing on it

Brenda knows that Bruce's manager is trying to offload a tricky task to another section, so she fends off the expected request from Bruce by framing his approach as a request for advice or information. At first, she jokingly refuses to give him the advice which he has not yet asked for. When he persists, albeit with a rather ambiguous request, she neatly deflects the implicit request for practical help by offering advice about who else might be able to help, and making it crystal clear that she has no further advice to offer.

Conclusion

The examples provided in this paper have illustrated 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. We have seen how, 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. As the brief analyses above have demonstrated, these contextual factors are crucial for interpreting the function of a given utterance within an interactional sequence.

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