

## **Language in the Workplace Symposium**

Convened by Janet Holmes  
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### **General Introduction**

The Language in the Workplace Symposium provided a forum for the presentation of a range of sociolinguistic research focussed around workplace discourse. While most of the presentations emanated from the Victoria University Language in the Workplace project, there were also reports from research undertaken in places other than Wellington, and a wide variety of different approaches to workplace discourse was represented.

The Symposium included reports on a range of research undertaken in Wellington government departments including the analysis of both spoken interaction (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine), and written discourse (Wallace). There were also reports of analyses based on data collected from a diverse range of workplaces from private commercial organisations, such as as Mobil Oil (NZ) Ltd and New Zealand Telecom, to data collected in an Auckland tanning factory (Brown), an American- Japanese car assembly plant (Sunasoshi), and a Hawkes Bay plant nursery (Fillary). The perspectives on the data included discussions of methodology (Fillary), analyses of directives (Brown), humour (Marra) and cross-cultural communication issues (Sunasoshi) in the workplace, an exploration of a possible model for evaluating workplace communication (Jones), and a discussion of the potential for extending an approach based on Bourdieu's theoretical framework from written to spoken discourse (Wallace).

The Symposium provided a valuable opportunity for discussants to share information, identify common problems and explore areas of mutual interest, as well as for others to learn about the range of research currently underway in this area.

## **Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project: Goals, Scope and Methodology**

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The Language in the Workplace (LWP) Project is based at Victoria University and the core research has been funded by the NZ Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. The broad goals of the project are:

- (1) to analyse the features of effective interpersonal communication in a variety of workplaces from a sociolinguistic perspective; and
- (2) to explore the practical implications of the results of the research for a range of New Zealand workplaces.

Effective communication with clients and colleagues is clearly crucial to the smooth and productive running of an organisation or business, as many training programmes recognise. But there is remarkably little research which examines in detail how people actually communicate verbally with their colleagues at work on a daily basis, and how they use language to manage the inevitable tensions between their various social and professional roles. Previous research has tended to focus on specialised contexts such as classrooms, courtrooms and doctor-patient interactions (eg Drew and Heritage 1992), or to use material derived from indirect sources such as self-report data, interviews, and anecdotal observations (eg see Williams 1988, Mott and Petrie 1995). The results have often been rather prescriptive, with rigid rules for how to run a meeting, for example, or how to manage others at work. Moreover, there is almost no New Zealand data to provide a resource for those teaching communication skills in New Zealand workplaces. Our goal was to collect genuine face-to-face spoken interaction in New Zealand workplaces in order to explore the wide diversity of ways that New Zealanders use to get things done effectively at work.

During 1996 and 1997, the Language in the Workplace team collected over 330 interactions in four New Zealand government agencies. These workplaces include one with a high proportion of women, one with a high proportion of Maori workers, and two with an ethnic and gender balance more closely reflecting the New Zealand norm. Altogether, 251 people (152 women and 99 men) from a range of ages and levels within each organisation were recorded. In terms of ethnicity, 111 of the participants are New Zealand Pakeha, 114 are Maori, and 26 are from other ethnic groups, such as Samoan or Chinese.

The bulk of the data consists of small, relatively informal work-related meetings and discussions ranging in time between twenty seconds and two hours. Such meetings fulfil a wide variety of purposes in these workplaces: to plan, to convey instructions, to seek advice, to check reports, to solve a problem or do a task, to provide feedback, to evaluate proposals,

and so on. The database also includes other types of interaction, such as social talk and telephone calls, and a number of larger and generally longer meetings were also videotaped. This data comes mainly from policy and advisory units, an environment where talk is integral to the core business of the workplace. The database thus provides an especially rich source for investigating how language functions in the ongoing construction of relationships in New Zealand workplaces.

The methodology developed for the project was designed to give participants maximum control over the data collection process (see Stubbe 1998). A group of volunteers from each workplace tape-recorded a range of their everyday work interactions over a period of about two weeks. Some kept a recorder and microphone on their desks, others carried the equipment round with them.

All those involved provided information on their ethnic background, home language, age and so on, contextual information, and permission for the data to be used for linguistic analysis. Throughout the process participants were free to edit and delete material as they wished. Even after they had completed recording and handed over the tapes, they could ask us to edit out material which they felt in retrospect they did not wish us to analyse. Over a period of time, however, people increasingly ignored the recording equipment, and there are often comments at the end of interactions indicating people had forgotten about the tape recorder. Also over time the amount of material they deleted, or which they asked us to edit out, decreased dramatically. By handing over control of the recording process in this way, an excellent research relationship with our workplace participants was developed, based on mutual trust. In return for guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, the volunteers provided a wide range of fascinating material.

More recently, the methodology has been adapted to collect data in a wider range of workplaces, including large corporate commercial organisations such as Mobil Oil (NZ) Ltd and New Zealand Telecom, small private businesses such as nurseries and garden centres in the Hawkes Bay area (see Fillary below), and a hide tanning factory in Auckland (see Brown below). The latter extensions of the project have a strongly "applied" component. The Hawkes Bay data is being collected from "sheltered" workplaces: i.e. small businesses which provide opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to begin work in a supportive context. The value of genuine data from the workplaces where students will be placed is obvious. The Auckland data is being collected from a factory which employs large numbers of staff for whom English is a second language, and which provides ESOL courses for its staff. Again, accurate information about the ways in which English is used in the factory will be of direct value to those learning English to assist them to cope in the factory environment.

The analyses undertaken to date by the project team encompass a range of pragmatic aspects of workplace talk, including directives (Holmes 1998a), social talk (Holmes in press), humour (Holmes 1998b), problem-

solving (Stubbe forthcoming) and management (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine (in press)).

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