THE DISCOURSE OF LEADERSHIP[1]

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Abstract

Leadership has been studied from many disciplinary perspectives, but sociolinguists have not yet made a contribution to understanding how leaders use language in accomplishing their roles as leaders. Analysing three examples of naturally occurring workplace talk, we demonstrate how three leaders from different workplaces employ diverse strategies in order to get things done at work. The different discourse strategies employed by the leaders include humour, hedging, and the recounting of an anecdote, strategies which serve primarily as face-saving, mitigating devices in the contexts analysed. A further more overt and direct approach, employed in a different cultural context, is the use of explicit coaching techniques, including repetition and explanation. The analysis supports our claim that 'doing leadership' is a discursive achievement, and that a person's communication skills are a crucial component in the construction of leadership.

1. Introduction and aim

Leadership is a complex concept which has been studied from a myriad of perspectives across diverse disciplines. Sociolinguistics, however, has not yet made a big contribution in this area. Most existing research on leadership has been undertaken in the areas of business communication and organisational science (e.g. Alvesson and Due Billing 1997; Sinclair 1998; Helgesen 1990;

Parry 2001). In these disciplines, leadership has generally been defined as 'the ability to influence others' (Dwyer 1993: 552; Hede, 2001). These studies thus tend to define the notions of 'good' or 'effective' leadership performance 'in terms of organisational outcomes' (Hede 2001: 7). Moreover, they focus predominantly on behavioural strategies which qualify people as good leaders (Sarros, Butchatsky and Santora 1996: 42), and they tend to neglect or overlook the discursive strategies used to perform leadership.

This paper is intended to addresses this research gap, and explore the issue of how people 'do' leadership in the workplace by drawing on a range of discursive strategies. Analysing natural data drawn from the corpus of the Language in the Workplace Project (http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp), we demonstrate how three leaders from different workplaces employ diverse strategies in order to get things done at work. The first example illustrates the use of humour as a face-saving device in interaction; the second exemplifies the use of hedges and anecdotes as mitigating devices; and the third demonstrates a much more explicit on record approach to getting things done, through explicit coaching techniques. The analysis will support our claim that 'doing leadership' is a discursive achievement, and that a person's communication skills are a crucial component in the construction of leadership.

2. Leadership

Leadership can be productively viewed as a performance in which an effective leader successfully integrates the achievement of transactional objectives with more relational aspects of workplace interaction (see Dwyer 1993; Gardner and Terry 1996; Heifertz 1998; Parry and Meindl 2002; Smith and Peterson 1988; Stodgill 1997). Transactional behaviours 'focus on the task to be achieved, the problem to be solved, or the purpose of the meeting' (Dwyer 1993: 572), while relationally oriented behaviours concentrate on fostering relationships, 'creating team' (Fletcher 1999), and developing a productive working atmosphere. Hence a useful definition of leadership performance or of 'doing leadership', which is supported by our analyses below, can be formulated as follows: *'doing leadership' entails competent communicative performance which, by influencing others, results in acceptable outcomes for the organisation (transactional/task-oriented goal), and which maintains harmony within the team or community of practice (relational/people-oriented goal).*

This definition of the discourse of effective leadership takes particular account of a person's communicative behaviour as a crucial component in achieving the desired outcomes (cf Hackman and Johnson 2000). It includes 'transactional' aspects of leadership, but also highlights more dynamic, interactional, and 'relational' aspects of leadership, and conceptualises leadership as a process or an activity (e.g. Bass 1998; Heifertz 1998: 347; Jackson and Parry 2001), rather than focussing just on the outcomes or achievements of leaders. In other words, this definition very explicitly encourages a focus on aspects of the communicative processes used by leaders to 'do being a leader'. Moreover, the definition explicitly includes attention to interpersonal interaction processes rather than focussing simply on what a leader achieves in terms of measurable outcomes (c.f. Parry 2001: 2; Hede 2001).

3. Framework

The analytical framework which we use to analyse the discourse of leadership draws predominantly on an interactional sociolinguistic model, within a broader social constructionist framework of communication, complemented by what we call Modified Politeness Theory. This theoretical framework is an updated and dynamic version of Politeness Theory which takes account of work by Spencer-Oatey (2000a) elaborating on rapport management in interaction, and of recent critical evaluations of Politeness Theory by Eelen (2001) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003). Modified Politeness Theory draws on socio-pragmatic concepts to the extent that we place a great deal of weight on contextual factors, including contextualisation cues (Gumperz 1999) in interpreting what is going on in an interaction. This approach emphasises the contextually assessable concept of 'appropriateness', rather than the culturally relative and problematic concept of 'politeness', and points to an understanding of the wider socio-cultural context as crucial for interpreting the discourse at a local level (Spencer-Oatey 2000a).[2]

As Wenger (1998) indicates, workplace interactions tend to be strongly embedded in the business and social context of a particular work group, a 'community of practice', as well as in a wider socio-cultural or institutional order. Our approach thus views discursive interaction as a dynamic process where meanings and intentions are jointly and progressively negotiated between the interlocutors in a specific community of practice (Eelen 2001; Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999). Consequently the focus in the analyses which follow is on

discourse at the micro-level of individual workplace interactions, and the analysis is qualitative and indicative rather than quantitative and definitive.

4. Analysis: The discourse of leadership

Leaders have a range of discursive strategies at their disposal on which they may draw when interacting with their colleagues and subordinates, thereby 'doing' leadership. Four of these strategies are discussed here in order to illustrate the complexities of effectively integrating transactional and relational objectives in performing leadership.

Example 1 illustrates how Donald, the CEO of a small New Zealand IT organisation, employs humour to encourage his subordinate, Ann, to comply with his demands. Example 2 discusses how Ruth, a senior policy manager of a New Zealand government department, utilises mitigating strategies and tells an anecdote in the process of providing guidance to her colleague Nell, and thus enhances the chances that Nell will follow her advice. Example 3 shows how Mr Liu, the CEO of a small Hong Kong colour company, gives advice to his subordinate Anthony by employing elements of coaching talk. In all three examples the leaders face a similar situation: they have to tell their subordinates and colleagues what to do. But they use different discursive strategies to achieve their aims.

4.1 Humour as a leadership tool

Example 1 is taken from an interaction between Donald and one of his subordinates, Ann, following a job interview with a third person, Beverley. They have decided to offer Beverley a job. Now Ann is to write a letter of offer to her.

Example 1[3]

1. Don: **yep + okay all right do you wanna right do up**
2. **a letter of offer**
3. Ann: **no //[laughs]**
4. Don: **/[laughs]\\ (are) you the project manager //[laughs]**
5. Ann: **/how do I\\ do that**
6. Don: **eh? [laughs] there's standard templates**
7. Ann: **for letters of offers?**
8. Don: **yep**

9. Ann: **oh hell**
10. Don: so but what you're gonna have to do is work out
11. what you're asking her to do and what the
12. what the position is +
13. **cos we don't have a position for (her) + [laughs]**
14. Ann: okay so what's that then

This example nicely illustrates how Donald uses humour to 'do' leadership. Discovering that Ann is reluctant to write the letter of offer (line 3), instead of forcing her to do her job, he humorously asks her if she is the project manager (line 4). His laughter accompanying the question mitigates its apparent face threat, and makes it easier for Ann to tell him what her problem is: she does not know how to write the letter (line 5). Donald then gives her advice and guidance (lines 6, 10-13). And when Ann once more signals her reluctance to do this particular task, Donald skilfully convinces her to take it on by developing a further humorous contribution (line 13).

Donald's humorous remark in line 13 (*cos we don't have a position for her*) fulfils various functions: it signals, but in a very positive way that pays attention to Ann's face needs, that he still expects Ann to write the letter, and at the same time brings her attention to another issue. It also lightens up the situation and enables Ann to accept the task (line 14), which makes it easier for Donald to further outline what he expects her to do. Using humour in this way, all participants' face needs are given attention. And Ann's positive reply in line 14 indicates that she is going to write the letter of offer after Donald has provided her with some more information about how to go about it.

Donald's behaviour in this excerpt provides an exemplary illustration of good leadership: he achieves his transactional objectives (getting Ann to write the letter), while also paying attention to relational factors (saving Ann's face and making it as easy as possible for her to comply). In addition to making sure that she knows what to do and ensuring her compliance, he puts considerable effort into making his advice and request as face-saving as possible. And humour is clearly a valuable strategy for this purpose, assisting Donald in achieving these leadership aims.

The second example illustrates two further strategies which can be used to integrate transactional and relational objectives in workplace interaction

4.2 Hedging and anecdote as leadership tools

Example 2 is an excerpt from an interaction between Ruth, the leader of a

department, and her subordinate colleague Nell, a policy analyst. The conversation takes place by Nell's desk. Nell has prepared an official letter on which Ruth gives her some feedback.

Example 2

Ruth: it's **actually** quite
I mean it's it's well written [inhales]
I **just** have I **just** think
the approach is **could** should be a bit different
in terms of
see like the organisation wouldn't
we wouldn't usually say something like this that
I mean it's true
but um we should **probably** put in there
that um the organisation has
what we did **actually** in terms of providing advice
on other avenues of funding //but\ that the organisation=
Nell: /mm\\
Ruth: =provides is a policy advice organization
and does not have um ++
they **actually** have only limited funding for sponsorship+
(and) I've **just** realised though that this is (like)
that they go in a couple of weeks
it **might** have been worth talking to Stacey ([name])
about um funding through I **think** it's through [name of
funding agency] ( ) last year we got funding for
[tut] a someone from Auckland University to
attend an international conference [drawls]:in: India
I think + I can't remember exactly the criteria
but there is a fund there and it **may might** be **a bit** late
but **just** I **mean** Stacey knows the contacts
and I **think** it's in [name of funding agency]
and whether or not it's worth having a talk to them about
whether or not there is any chance of something [voc]
a group like this putting in an application
if we supported it
cos what happened this last time was
we we wrote to [name of funding agency] **I think it was**

34. and we supported the application and it got through

Ruth's primary objective in this interaction is to give feedback to Nell regarding the letter that she has prepared. More specifically, as Nell's superior and the one responsible for her performance, Ruth wants Nell to make some amendments to the letter (lines 4-7). She provides Nell with the information she needs to write a letter of this type that conforms to the organisation's procedure. But even though the overall function of the conversation is directive, Ruth puts considerable effort into maintaining Nell's (as well as her own) face needs. In other words, she is concerned both with the transactional side of the task - ensuring that the letter is of an appropriate standard - but also takes care to address the relational issue of Nell's face needs.

To effectively integrate these two objectives, Ruth uses a range of skilful and diverse strategies for mitigating her critical comments and her directives. In this short interaction of approximately three minutes, she uses a variety of hedges and minimisers (in bold above): *could*, *may*, *might*, *probably*, *just* (2), *actually* (3), *I mean* (3) and *I think* (5), and approximators, *a bit*, *I think it was*, *I can't remember exactly* etc. These devices minimize the illocutionary force of the face threatening implicit criticisms and directive speech acts, and pay attention to Nell's face needs (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Another means Ruth uses to minimise the critical implications of her comments is to highlight the positive. So she begins positively, highlighting the fact that Nell's version of the letter is fine, *it's well written* (line 2). She also acknowledges that what Nell has said is true (line 8), but comments that it is not the *usual* way of doing things in the organisation. The shift from *the organisation* (line 6) to the use of the pronoun *we* (line 7) is strategically ambiguous between exclusive and positively polite inclusive meaning, (*we wouldn't usually say something like this*): ie. *we* could refer exclusively to the organisation, indicating the approved institutional way of approaching the issue and implying that Nell is not behaving as one of the team in her usage here; but the fact that *we* may also be used inclusively allows for the possibility that Ruth is suggesting that she and Nell are working on this together, thereby again saving both interlocutors' face in a potentially tricky situation.

In addition to these face saving mitigating strategies, Ruth also uses a brief workplace anecdote (see Holmes and Marra in press) to achieve her transactional and relational goals. This is another useful strategy for minimising the directive force of her comments. She tells Nell a story about how funding was obtained for somebody else in the past, who was in a similar situation (lines

21-24). Finally, she then makes a constructive suggestion, explicitly recommending Nell to talk to Stacey, who is knowledgeable in this area. Ruth thus acts as a good leader, offering Nell several ways of improving her knowledge and performance, with specific concrete direction and information on how to improve the letter, and doing so in ways which takes account of Nell's feelings and face needs. Mitigation is clearly at the core of this array of strategies.

The final example introduces yet another strategy successfully employed by a leader to achieve workplace objectives in a socio-culturally appropriate manner. In his interactions with his colleagues in business meetings, Mr Liu adopts an explicit 'coaching' style to get his message across, spelling out what he wants done quite explicitly.[4]

4.3 Coaching as a leadership tool

The excerpt analysed below is taken from a business meeting in Hong Kong, illustrating the relevance of our definition of how people 'do' leadership, even in non-English speaking countries, while also providing an opportunity to indicate areas of potential cultural contrast.

Example 3 comes from one of a series of management meetings recorded in a Hong Kong paint company. The language of the meeting is Cantonese, translated here to facilitate discussion of the discursive strategies adopted by the leader to achieve his objectives. Mr Liu is the CEO and the most senior person in this meeting which is chaired by Anthony, the company's Production Manager. Anthony is giving a production report about tests that have been done with two chemicals. He concludes by saying that after two tests, there seems to be no substantial difference between the chemicals from the company's viewpoint; ie. one chemical could replace the other (line 1).

Example 3[5]

1. Ant: *... jigaa zoi si do ci ne zau mou mantai laak*
   'we've tested it again and there's no problem'
2. Dan: *mou mantai*
   'no problem'
3. Ant: *ze loeng go caamdo*
   'I mean they are pretty much the same thing'
4. Liu: ***mhai** nei gam jigaa zikhai **jatbeijat daawo wo***
   '**no** it's now **one-to-one one-all**'
5. Ant: 'mm'

6. Liu: *naa pungdou- keisat pungdou gamge cingfong ne*
7. *ngo jingwai ne **jinggoi zou do ci***
'look when you have- actually when you have a situation like this i think you **should do it again**'
8. Ant: *mm daisaam ci*
'mm a third time'
9. Liu: *haa **jinggoi** zou dai- **zou do jat ci daisaam ci***
10. *janwai dimgaai aa nei daijat ci honang moujat fongmin*
11. *ceotmantai douzi gamge gitgo gam daiji ci*
12. *laigong nei zou ceotlei hai go soengfaange*
13. *gitgo jigo hai **jatbeijat***
'yeah you **should** do a- **do one more time that's a third time** why? because certain aspect perhaps has gone wrong in the first test so you've got that result and you've got an opposite result in the second test. this is **one-to-one**'
14. Ant: 'mm'
15. Liu: *haai **jatbeijat** gamge jinzoeng leoimin*
16. *keisat **jinggoi zou do ci***
'in a situation of one-to-one actually you **should do it one more time**'
17. +
18. Ant: 'mm'
19. Liu: ***haiwaa***
'**right**?'
20. Ant: *hou*
'all right'
21. Liu: *gam jinhau nei sinzi ne wui*
22. *gogo **hangdingsing zik koengzo***
'only by doing so you can i mean **your certainty would become stronger**'
23. Ant: 'mm'
24. [Anthony clarifies how the second test differed from the first one]
25. Ant: *batgwo ngo tungji ne hai hoji zoi zou do ci*
'but I agree that it can be done one more time'
26. Dan: *hai mouco*
'yeah that's right'
27. Liu: *gam- gam oncyunsing goudi ( )*
28. *zoi- zoi- zoi [smiling voice]: zoi zing do ci:*

29. *goi gewaa ne hou daiwok ge*
'therefore it'd be safer ( ) it would be a very big problem if we had to change it again'
30. Ant: *hai aa*
'that's true'
31. Liu: *gam soji ningjyun **zoi zou do ci***
'therefore it's better to **do it one more time**'
32. Ant: 'mm'
33. Liu: ***haa** gamjoeng gam [drawls]: go: leidak gogo-*
34. *bei nei ge gitleon ne*
35. *go **seonsam koengzo aamaa***
'**yeah** that's all and the result you're getting **would strengthen your confidence**'
36. Ant: *hai aa*
'that's true'
37. Liu: ***haiwaa***
'**right?**'
38. Ant: 'mm'
39. Liu: *zauhai gamjoeng **haa houmhou aa***
'that's all **yeah is it all right**?'
40. Ant: */hou*
'all right'
41. Liu *//gam\ ngo jingwai gogo **zou do ci***
'so I think the test should **be done one more time**'
42. Ant: 'mm'

Mr Liu considers that the two tests undertaken so far do not provide a clear basis for choosing between the two chemicals: they are equal, he suggests since each gave a different result: *now one to one one all* (line 4). He proceeds to challenge Anthony's conclusion with the goal of convincing him to undertake another test. From a western perspective, Mr Liu's statements are very direct and confrontational. Note, for instance, the use of the direct disagreement particle *no* (line 4); and the repeated use of the modal *should* (lines 7, 9, 16). There are none of the explicit hedges and softeners which were apparent in the previous two examples.

However, Mr Liu does pay attention to the rapport dimension (Spencer-Oatey 2000a), though in a culturally different way from that of the New Zealand leaders. Firstly, the very fact that he provides Anthony with advice

could be seen as an aspect of rapport work (Hinkel 1994). In addition, he uses two specific strategies which seem to be aimed at persuading Anthony to accept his advice, namely, repetition and providing explicit explanation. Mr Liu repeats his directive to do a third test no less than five times (lines 7, 9, 16, 31, 41); and he also repeats his interpretation of the result, *one to one* (lines 4, 13). Repetition is one way of acknowledging the addressee's position by taking the trouble to convince them.

We have described Mr Liu's style as 'coaching'. It shares many features with the coaching talk reported in Heath and Langman (1994), and some features, such as repetition in particular, with aspects of coaching talk in the sports context. (See, for example, Kuiper and Lodge (2004)). Mr Liu's contributions are clearly designed to take account of Anthony's career needs, as well as his face needs. Although he could simply insist that Anthony repeats the test, Mr Liu takes time to explain why he considers Anthony's position is untenable, thus paying Anthony the compliment of taking his position seriously. In lines 6-13, he spells out his reasoning quite explicitly so that Anthony can follow his logic (i.e. that in the case of contradictory results you need to do the test again). And he follows this up with a reassuring comment which relates the benefits of the action recommended to Anthony rather than the company *your certainty would become stronger* (line 22), a point which is also repeated (line 35). This attention to the addressee's position can be interpreted as an indication of respect, and an alternative way of doing relational practice.

As in the examples above, this leader selects strategies which are designed to achieve both transactional goals (getting another test run, teaching Anthony the importance of thorough testing), as well as relational goals (taking account of Anthony's position, taking time to address his concerns). From a western perspective, his approach is one of coaching Anthony, and helping him learn how to do his job better. This analysis is further supported by the fact that Mr Liu explicitly seeks Anthony's agreement, and elicits feedback to ensure that Anthony has understood his point, using the Cantonese question particle *right* (lines 19, 37) and expressions such as *yeah* (lines 33, 39), and *is it all right* (line 39). In this context, it is also interesting to note that Mr Liu employs competitive sporting terminology, for example in this excerpt, *one all* (line 4) and *one-to-one* to describe the situation (lines 4, 13, 15), reducing formality and social distance by perhaps suggesting that Mr Liu is here acting more like a sports coach than a company director. Certainly. Mr Liu's style here contrasts markedly with the more formal approach used by the Hong Kong Chinese

business men in the meetings analysed by Bilbow (1998) and Spencer-Oatey (2000b).[6] Thus this can be interpreted as another strategy used by Mr Liu to make it easier for his subordinate to accept the directive and to comply.

The example thus nicely illustrates how by employing a coaching style Mr Liu manages to combine both leadership objectives: he achieves his transactional objectives while also maintaining harmony within the team (by considering his subordinate's face needs). And Anthony's positive responses in lines 32, 36, 38 and 40, where the falling intonation in each response can be interpreted as indicating that he agrees with his superior, suggest that Mr Liu's discursive strategies have been successful. Mr Liu's style is an interestingly explicit instance of what Hofstede (2001) has described as the paternalistic management style characterising Hong Kong Chinese business people.

5. Conclusion

The analysis in this paper has identified a range of different strategies on which leaders may draw when 'doing' leadership in their everyday working interactions. They may, for example, use humour or hedges to mitigate the face threat of a directive, tell an anecdote to illustrate a point and also reduce the directness of a request, or adopt elements of coaching talk to assist a subordinate understand what is required as part of their job. Different strategies suit different social contexts, different workplace cultures, and different communities of practice. In example 1, Donald selects a strategy suitable for a small company where maintaining good personal relationships is crucial because people work so closely together. In example 2, the relatively 'feminine' culture of this community of practice (see Holmes and Stubbe 2003) encourages the use of hedging and story-telling as mitigating strategies. In the third workplace, with a very different culture from the other two, the leader adopts a much more direct approach to achieving his transactional aims, while orienting to relational issues through a coaching style. So, while each of the three leaders skilfully combines the achievement of transactional objectives with the performance of more relational oriented behaviours in communicating with their subordinates and colleagues, they do so in a range of contrasting ways, illustrating the discursive diversity available to leaders in workplace interaction.

Discourse is an important means of constructing social identity (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003), and leadership is a central aspect of social identity in

the workplace. In this short paper, we have described just some of the strategies that effective leaders use to convincingly 'do leadership' in three different workplaces, in order to support our claim that effective leadership involves skilful use of discursive strategies to integrate both transactional and relational objectives within specific communities of practice. Our future research will test these claims further with more leaders and in a wider range of workplaces.

Notes

1 The research discussed in this paper was presented in preliminary form at the 15th Linguistic Society Conference, Victoria University of Wellington, 5 September 2003. The paper draws on the PhDs (in progress) of Stephie Schnurr, Angela Chan and Tina Chiles, together with material developed on the topic of leadership and discourse by these students in an ongoing discussion group led by Janet Holmes. We would like to thank Meredith Marra for assistance with editing this paper. We express our appreciation to other members of the Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) team for assistance with data collection and transcription, and to those who allowed their interactions to be recorded and analysed as part of the LWP database. Finally we express our appreciation for the helpful and constructive comments of the two anonymous reviewers.

2 See also Mills (2003) and Watts (2003) for further discussion of the knotty issues surrounding the distinction between 'appropriate' and 'polite' behaviour.

3 This example draws on material that is further discussed and analysed in Schnurr (fc).
The transcription conventions used in examples:

[laughs] : :	Paralinguistic features in square brackets, colons indicate start/finish
+	Pause of up to one second
... //.....\ ...	Simultaneous speech
... /.....\\ ...	
(hello)	Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance
=	Speaker's turn continues
=	
?	Rising or question intonation
-	Incomplete or cut-off utterance
… …	Section of transcript omitted

All names used in examples are pseudonyms.

4 See Kuiper and Lodge (2004) for examples of coaching talk in a sporting context.

5 This example draws on material that is further discussed and analysed in Chan (fc). The original Cantonese appears in italics and the romanization system adopted in the transcription was designed by the Linguistics Society of Hong

Kong (known as the Jyutping Scheme). The excerpt was translated by Angela Chan.

6 Though it should be noted that this may partly reflect the use of English as a lingua franca in these intercultural meetings.

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