

Vine, Bernadette. 2001. Workplace, Language and Power: Directives, request and advice, LALS, Victoria University of Wellington: PhD.

Abstract

This thesis investigates power in the interactions of four women and their workplace colleagues. Power is explored by examining the forms used to express "control acts", i.e., directives, requests and advice, and through investigation of the way control acts pattern in the discourse and whether they are mitigated. A Speech Act Theory approach is used as the starting point, with insights from other analytical approaches such as Conversation Analysis also being drawn on where relevant.

Almost all of the control acts are mitigated. There are differences, however, in the mitigation patterns of Managers as opposed to those of their staff. Whereas Managers tend to provide internal or external modification based on how much a topic has been discussed, lower level staff always provide both internal and external mitigation when dealing with their Managers.

The roles of the two interactants are also evident in the large number of control acts in the speech of the Managers compared to that of lower level staff, but are less obvious in other aspects of their discourse. Managers frequently use "consultative" power, for instance in the way they involve their staff in the decision making process. They also empower their staff by acknowledging their staffs' skills and expertise; recognising their "expert" power. Both Managers are seen to have an interactive "participative" style of management. They more often minimise rather than exert power and they pay attention to their interlocutor's face needs.

Other social factors are also relevant, such as the purpose of the interaction and the social distance between interactants. The purpose of an interaction has a strong influence on who speaks the most and on the type of control acts. The importance of social distance is highlighted by the data provided by one Manager who recorded interactions involving both her permanent Executive Assistant and a temporary Executive Assistant. Clear differences are found in the control acts directed at each of these women, with the main difference being the explicitness of the forms used.

A lack of overt power enactment is found in interactions between people at different levels within the organisation. It is unsurprising, therefore, that interactions between equals show a similar interactive style. In these cases, control acts are always mitigated, showing respect for others. The women also collaborate in their development and progression of topics and in their patterns of turn-taking.

A Conversation Analysis view of language maintains that interaction is responsible for determining the nature of the relationship between people. Social distance and power are not fixed properties; they are negotiated through interaction. This process is evident in the way the women in this workplace interact with each other.

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