

Forget Venus and Mars, Let's get Back to Earth: Challenging gender stereotypes in the workplace?¹

Based on an article of the same title by Maria Stubbe, Meredith Marra, Bernadette Vine, and Janet Holmes.

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A recent cartoon shows four men in business suits and two “power-dressed” women sitting round a table with papers in front of them. One of the men is saying, “That was a fine report, Barbara. But since the sexes speak different languages, I probably didn’t understand a word of it.”

Do men and women really speak different languages? Many management texts and workplace communication programmes suggest that the answer is “yes”. All that is needed is a way of decoding the other sex’s ‘real’ meaning. Indeed, this cartoon suggests that perhaps the difference is so great, there is no point even bothering to understand the other sex!

If any one of us were asked to describe exactly what it is that men and women do differently, I’m sure we’d all come up with very similar stereotypes: Men speak more directly, aggressively, and competitively, whereas women’s speech is more indirect, conciliatory, facilitative. But think about it a minute. Have you never met a man who uses facilitative communication strategies? Or a woman whose language can be aggressive in tone? Our research into effective communication in New Zealand workplaces shows just how careful we need to be when it comes to our expectations of men and women’s speech.

Giving Orders

Let’s take, for example, how men and women give orders. The stereotype of ‘feminine’ communication is that orders are given indirectly. For example, the direct form of an order such as “Send this fax”, is usually associated with a ‘masculine’ style, while the more indirect “If it’s not too much trouble, would you be able to send this fax for me please” is more closely associated with the ‘feminine’ style.

While our workplace research certainly showed women using indirect strategies, it also showed them using a much more direct style usually associated with ‘masculine’ speech.

For example:

*Ginette: if they don't match there's something wrong **STOP THE LINE...** so **make sure you check then properly...***

These two examples of direct orders (in bold) are from Ginette (a pseudonym) who is a female factory team leader, during a team briefing meeting. This example is not atypical of Ginette's speech. During these meetings she is often direct and assertive, using many direct orders in a manner somewhat reminiscent of a school teacher. However in one-to-one interactions, she can adapt her style to use more indirect orders (again in bold):

*Ginette: that's right + **just remember that when you're doing the check list you put down what YOU find not what it should be + so you're checking against what it should be if it don't match then there's something wrong***

We found a similar contradiction of the speech stereotypes in a government department setting. LC is a male manager and, in this example, he is facilitating a wide-ranging discussion, and in doing so he uses some very indirect orders.

BP: do you want me to write them down

LC: can you #

I mean I just think where we've we've identified //some\thing we //want\ to carry that through 'cause later on we may want to come back to it

CF: one that i'm am surprised at is [institution] engineering

LC: hang on can we can we //stay\ in the- do this block first

So what we can see from these examples (and from many others in our database) is that men and women frequently do not fit the stereotypes in the way they give orders in their workplaces.

Humour- supporting and controlling

Another area we have examined is humour. Women are generally portrayed as humourless in the workplace; another aspect of the different languages that men and women are purported to speak. However in the 22 workplace meetings we examined, we found that women used humour a great deal. In fact from the 396 instances of humour we found in these meetings, we were able to calculate that women used humour an average of 25 times per 100 minutes, while men used 14 instances of humour per 100 minutes.

We also looked more closely at two different kinds of humour: The sort which we use to affirm our friendship with others (called ‘supporting humour’) and the sort that we use to soften criticism or orders (called ‘controlling humour’). If we follow the stereotype, we’d probably expect women to use mostly supportive humour, and men to use mostly controlling humour. Yet, as with the direct and indirect orders, we found men and women made use of both kinds of humour. For example, when the group goes off topic, Penelope, the chairperson, attempts to get back on track using a direct order overlaid with a humorous, motherly tone of voice which is another example of controlling humour.

Penelope: settle down

Group: [laughs]

Softeners

Here’s a little exercise for you: If women and men did speak different languages, what would you guess the gender of Speaker X to be?

*Speaker X: ... er I **just** I do want to say that I want to say **you know** look um **you know** if we- if we're gonna be good policy advisers...*

How about Speaker Y?

*Speaker Y: **although I mean I can appreciate the that sort of message but on the other other hand** um + don't **sort of** + **sort of** say that as something that sh- that should be the norm //like\ that's*

Both of these speakers are using a lot of words (shown in bold) to soften what they are saying. Softening devices are often associated with ‘feminine’ speech, and so maybe you

guessed that both Speaker X and Speaker Y were female. However, given all the examples we have looked at already which contradict our speech stereotypes, you may by now feel less confident about assigning gender to these speakers. In fact Speaker X is a male who is using softeners in his speech to establish himself as a hardworking subordinate to his female boss who has just been pointing out some differing work expectations and miscommunications between them. Speaker Y is that female boss who, later in the conversation, is using the softeners to mitigate the effect of her disagreement with what Speaker X is saying. In these examples the male (X) and the female (Y) speakers are using the same communication strategy to soften what they are saying, but for quite different reasons.

Minimal Feedback

In this same interaction between Speaker X and Speaker Y another communication pattern associated with 'feminine' speech was evident: the use of minimal feedback (such as 'mmm', 'yeah', 'really') while listening to someone else. This is used to show the speaker that you're really listening, and fits in with the stereotype that women are good listeners. However, in this example, it is the male speaker who makes good use of such minimal feedback while listening to his female boss disagree with him.

Speaker Y: *although I mean I can appreciate the that sort of message but on the other hand um + don't sort of + sort of say that as something that sh- that should be the norm like that's*

Speaker X: *mm*

Speaker Y: *really you know when things are really*

Speaker X: *from time to time*

Speaker Y: *from time to time that it's not a good way of them expecting to organise their work all the time*

Speaker X: *ae yeah*

Speaker Y: *that they need you know it's the old work smarter sort of stuff*

Speaker X: *yeah*

Speaker Y: *and we need to- to sort of be aware of we being a (friend-)*

I family friendly workplace

A high frequency of verbal feedback is not considered to be typical of a stereotypically 'masculine' style of speech. However, in this situation Speaker X makes good use of it as a strategy to get back on a more equal footing with his boss.

Different Languages?

So what do all these examples show us? Let's return to the cartoon described at the start of this article, and the question it posed: 'Do men and women really speak different

languages?’ With respect to New Zealand workplaces, the answer has to be emphatically **NO**: Men and women do not speak different languages. Yes, there are communication strategies which are associated with either masculinity or femininity, but both men and women may choose to use any of these strategies in different situations. What our research shows is that effective communicators, whatever their gender, choose communication strategies to suit the situation. The ability to be flexible in selecting and switching communication styles is the key to being an effective communicator in the workplace (and probably in other places too!).

ⁱ This article reports findings from a research project entitled ‘Language in the Workplace’ being conducted in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies at Victoria University of Wellington by Professor Janet Holmes, Maria Stubbe, Bernadette Vine, Meredith Mara and a team of research assistants and associates. The research began in 1996 and is supported by a grant from the New Zealand Foundation for Research, Science and Technology. The project’s long term goals are to contribute to the development of more effective interpersonal communication in New Zealand workplaces.

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