

Getting things done in a New Zealand workplace¹

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1. Introduction

People in positions of power are seen as having the right to use direct forms such as imperatives when telling subordinates to do things (see e.g., Steffan & Eagly 1985, Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987). In this paper I briefly examine the ways a Manager, Sonia², issues directives to two of her staff, Genevieve (Policy Analyst) and Beth (Executive Assistant), i.e., what forms does she use when asking them to do things? And does she use more direct forms with Anna, the lower status addressee? Also, what other aspects of context need to be examined to give a fuller picture of any differences in Sonia's directives to these two different addressees?

2. Forms Used

In their work on politeness, Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) and Leech (1983) both note that the least polite and most direct way of uttering a directive or request is by using an imperative. Less direct forms such as interrogatives are seen as being much more polite. Declaratives are less direct than imperatives but more direct than interrogatives. They are therefore, considered more polite than imperatives but less polite than interrogatives.

I categorised the directive utterances identified in Sonia's speech according to whether they are imperatives, example 1(a), interrogatives, example 1(b), or declaratives, example 1(c). Before classifying them in this way, I separated out directive utterances which did not directly refer to the addressee completing a required action, such as example 1(d). I refer to this type of utterance as non-explicit. This paper mainly focuses on explicit directives, such as 1(a), (b) and (c).

Example 1:

- a. leave me with Marcie's copy
- b. actually can you put that in my diary too?
- c. you need to just check the travel booking
- d. [project one] is a priority *meaning* 'leave [project two] for now'
[Genevieve had asked how urgent and important the work on [project two] is]

¹ The data used in the analysis comes from the Language in the Workplace Project. This project is based at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington. It aims to explore how New Zealanders communicate in workplace settings (see e.g., Holmes, Stubbe & Vine 1999 for a brief summary of the project) or visit our website at <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals>

More detailed results and discussion of the data in this paper are contained in Vine (2001).

² All names used are pseudonyms.

Table 1 summarises the number of imperative, interrogative and declarative directive utterances identified in Sonia's speech to Genevieve and Beth.

Table 1: Form of Sonia's directives to Genevieve and Beth

Addressee	Occupation	Imperative	Interrogative	Declarative	Total Explicit	Total Overall
Genevieve	Policy Analyst	14 (41%)	3 (9%)	7 (21%)	24 (71%)	34
Beth	Exec Asst	9 (17%)	7 (13%)	16 (30%)	32 (60%)	54

Sonia did not use one form exclusively to either Genevieve or Beth and, contrary to expectations, Sonia issued a much larger percentage of imperatives to Genevieve, a higher status Policy Analyst, than to the lower status Executive Assistant, Beth. She also used more interrogative forms, associated with a higher level of politeness, to Beth.

3. What about other contextual factors?

The figures in Table 1 are provided with very little context. We know the status relationships between the speaker and the addressee, but what about other aspects of the context? Other factors may also affect the results noted above and need to be considered in order to give a fuller picture of the differences between Sonia's directives to Genevieve and Beth.

A first important difference is that the 34 directive utterances directed to Genevieve all came from the same interaction, while the 54 examples noted in Sonia's interactions with Beth arose from three interactions. Sonia's interactions with Beth were all much shorter than her one interaction with Genevieve and the main purpose was generally for Sonia to give instructions. Table 2 gives the main purpose, length of interactions, and the number of directive utterances per minute of interaction time.

The number of directive utterances per minute in Sonia's interaction with Genevieve is 0.97. When interacting with Beth, there is a range from 1.5 to 2 per minute and the average number per minute is 1.86, i.e., there are twice as many directive utterances per minute when Sonia is dealing with Beth. This result is not surprising given that the main purpose of each of Sonia's interactions with Beth relates to task allocation.

Purpose of interaction, like status, might also suggest that Beth would receive more direct and less polite directives than Genevieve. When the main purpose is task allocation, the addressee is predisposed to hear directives. There would seem to be less need to hedge and soften directives through the use of polite forms such as interrogatives. The opposite could also be argued of course. Because the main purpose is to give directives, the speaker can be more indirect without fear that their addressee will not realise that they are being given a directive.

Table 2: Main purpose, length and number of directives per minute in Sonia's interactions with Genevieve and Beth

Addressee	Interaction	Main purpose	Length	No of directive utterances	Directive utterances per minute
Genevieve	1	Problem-solving	35 mins	34	0.97
Beth	1	Assign tasks	11	23	2.00
	2	Assign tasks	8	12	1.50
	3	Assign tasks	10	19	1.9

Because Sonia's interactions with Beth are shorter and there are more directives, there are generally less extended sections of discussion relating to each directive. This factor may also result in the use of more polite and indirect forms, such as the interrogative form, because there are less politeness markers in the surrounding discourse. Further evidence that this may be happening can be found by examining the cases where Sonia uses interrogatives to Genevieve. These arise in situations where there has been less discussion of a topic. For example, Sonia returns briefly to the issue of a conference Genevieve has said she will attend, Example 2.

Example 2:

- 1 Gen: um
 2 Sonia: so now when's that again? oh and /if you can [false start]\³
 3 Gen: /Tues\day
 4 Sonia: Tuesday can you when you email to Nadine can you do a copy email to Beth? so that she can log on the calendar
 5

Sonia's directive here is an interrogative. There is a slight warning that it is coming because Sonia makes a false start, line 2, i.e., she begins to ask Genevieve to do something and then stops. The directive is also followed by the reason that Sonia wants Beth informed. The whole section lasts only a few seconds and the discussion then moves onto other issues. The directives identified in brief sections such as this throughout Sonia and Genevieve's interaction, took less direct and more polite forms such as the interrogative.

Closer examination of the situations where Sonia uses imperatives to Genevieve shows that these directives tend to evolve from an on-going and lengthy discussion of an issue.

Example 3:

- 1 Sonia: okay good idea good idea so well look in terms of that

³ / \ indicates overlapping speech

- 2 *report you you you um*
 3 Gen: *yeah I'll finish /doing it*
 4 Sonia: */you\ finish doing it*
 5 *and make some notes*

The directives in Example 3 are expressed explicitly and both take the form of the imperative. They have come, however, at the end of a great deal of discussion and are therefore modified and softened by the whole preceding section of discourse. Sonia is reinforcing suggestions made by Genevieve about the best way to proceed and the directives act as a summary of the conclusions of their discussion. In line 3, Genevieve even anticipates the completion of the first directive.

Only nine of Sonia's directive head acts to Beth are imperatives. Most of these are surrounded by other directives which relate to aspects of the same task and which take a non-imperative form. When there is a high density of directives in an interaction, the imperatives are often softened by the forms of the other directives clustering around them. Four also contain softeners before the verb such as 'just' or 'oh'.

4. Summary

There are differences in the way that Sonia issues directives to Genevieve and Beth. These differences cannot be accounted for by just examining status differences or by only looking at the directive utterances. A number of other contextual factors need to be explored, including the purpose of the interactions and aspects of the surrounding discourse.

In a similar white collar context in Hong Kong, Bilbow (1997: 482) found that speakers associated high authoritative with not only 'use of highly direct discourse (especially imperatives) appropriate to the role of the speaker' but also to the use of devices such as providing reasons and explanations for any directives. Using these criteria Sonia demonstrates a high degree of authoritative. Most of her directives are explicit, and she frequently 'grounds' them by providing reasons and explanation. She also shows understanding of another important aspect of effective workplace communication. Although workplace interaction is primarily goal-orientated, a failure to pay attention to personal relationships can result in job dissatisfaction, which in turn lowers employee motivation and productivity (Dwyer 1993).

5. References

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