Gendered Talk at Work

Constructing Social Identity Through
Workplace Interaction

Janet Holmes

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Language and Social Change

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For Tony

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The Role of Gender in Workplace Talk

How do women and men talk at work? Are there distinctively 'feminine' or particularly 'masculine' ways of interacting in the workplace? If so, who uses them? In what contexts? And to what effect? This book explores the ways in which gender contributes to the interpretation of meaning in workplace interaction, and examines how women and men negotiate their gender identities as well as their professional roles in everyday workplace talk. The analysis demonstrates that effective communicators, both female and male, typically draw from a very wide and varied discursive repertoire, ranging from normatively 'feminine' to normatively 'masculine' ways of talking, and that they skilfully select their discursive strategies in response to the particular interactional context. I argue that their effectiveness derives from this discursive flexibility and contextual sensitivity.

By identifying the diversity in social and linguistic practices enacted by both women and men at work, I also hope to advance the interests of those, especially women, who run up against barriers to advancement as a result of prejudice and stereotyping. There is little doubt that most workplaces are predominantly masculine domains with masculine norms for behaving, including ways of interacting. Consequently, women often find themselves disadvantaged. Moreover, much research in areas such as management, business and leadership has, until relatively recently, tended to bolster such attitudes and misconceptions. The evidence in this book that people's interactional styles at work are anything but uniform, and that stylistic diversity and sensitivity to context are features of the ways in which both women and men interact at work, may help to counter negative stereotypes and undermine the prejudice that affects women in particular in many workplaces.

Having said that, I am not arguing that gender is irrelevant in workplace talk. Gender is potentially relevant in every social interaction, a 'pervasive social category',[1] and an undeniable, ever-present influence on how we behave, even if our level of awareness of this influence varies from one interaction to another, and from moment to moment within an interaction.[2] As Ann Weatherall points put,

> The identification of a person as belonging to one of two gender groups is a fundamental guide to how they are perceived, how their behaviour is interpreted and how they are responded to in every interaction and throughout the course of their life.[3]

The workplace data which provides the basis for the analysis in this book supports the view that gender is always potentially relevant to understanding what is going on in face-to-face interaction. Ignoring it will not make it less relevant. Gender is always there – a latent, omnipresent, background factor in every communicative encounter, with the potential to move into the foreground at any moment, to creep into our talk in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, as I will illustrate.

At some level we are always aware of whether we are talking to a woman or a man, and we bring to every interaction our familiarity with societal gender stereotypes and the gendered norms to which women and men are expected to conform. We orient to norms 'as a kind of organizing device in society, an ideological map, setting out the range of the possible within which we place ourselves and assess others'.[4] In other words, gender is an ever-present consideration, though participants may not always be conscious of its influence on their behaviour. In fact, it seems likely that awareness of the relevance of gender in interaction moves in and out of participants' consciousness.[5]

Consider the following excerpt from an interaction recorded in a small New Zealand IT company:

Example 1.1[6]

Context: Jill, Chair of the Board of an IT company, has had a problem with her computer and has consulted Douglas, a software engineer, for help. Returning to her office, she reports her experience to her colleague, Lucy, a project manager in the company.

1. **Jill**:   [*walks into room*] he just laughed at me
2. **Lucy**: [laughs]: oh no:
3. **Jill**:   he's definitely going to come to my aid
4.   but ( ) he just sort of laughed at me
5. **Lucy**: [laughs]
6. **Jill**:   and then I've got this appalling reputation
7.   of being such a technical klutz

Jill makes no overt reference to gender in this exchange, and yet gender stereotypes are a vital component of the scenario she constructs. She draws attention to her reputation as ignorant, a *technical klutz* (line 7), in the area of the organization's specialization, computer technology. And she also describes how her ignorance elicited laughter from the male expert who assisted her (lines 1, 4). In this self-deprecating construction of herself, Jill is undoubtedly drawing on the well-established stereotype of feminine incompetence around technology. Moreover, she makes use of normatively 'feminine' linguistic features in doing so: e.g. emphatic intensifiers *just*, *definitely*, *such a* (see next section). We have abundant evidence from further recordings to suggest that *technical klutz* is an identity she regularly adopts, milking it for humour and playing up her role as inept and ignorant in the IT area.[7] This a simple example of how gender may contribute to the social meaning of an interaction, and be relevant to a full understanding of what is being conveyed, but in an understated and subtle way rather than in a foregrounded and emphatic manner.

In fact Jill is a very able and confident woman manager in this workplace, and in the larger context of her workplace role, this exchange can be interpreted as having elements of ironic parody of the stereotypical role associated with women around computers.[8] In other words, by refusing to treat lack of IT technical knowledge as a serious matter, she implicitly 'troubles',[9] or parodies, 'traditional norms about feminine behaviour',[10] and questions the validity of stereotypically discounting the competence of women who are technically unsophisticated.

Of course, men may be technically ignorant too, but the equivalent exchange between two men would, I contend, equally exploit the 'feminine' stereotype of the technical *klutz*. In other words, a male incompetent in the area of computer technology would play out such an interaction aware that he was invoking a normatively 'feminine' role in doing so.[11] Gender stereotypes contribute differently in different

contexts, but they are omnipresent and always available to make a contribution to socio-pragmatic meaning.

Women in leadership positions in many New Zealand workplaces still need to prove themselves: the double bind of 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' regarding women's ways of talking, which was identified by Robin Lakoff in the 1970s,[12] has characteristically transformed into a demand that women leaders talk in ways perceived as appropriate both to their gender identities and their (often stereotypically masculine) professional identities. The business management literature provides extensive testimony to the pervasiveness of these conflicting requirements of senior women.[13] Different women respond in different ways to these demands, as I will show.[14] Furthermore, people's ways of talking are typically strongly influenced by specific features of their workplaces, and by the particular type of interaction in which they are involved – a crucial point, and one which is central to the argument in this book.

Management research suggests that, like other countries, many New Zealand workplaces are still male dominated, and a substantial number operate with stereotypically masculine or 'masculinized'[15] norms with regard to particular aspects of behaviour, including verbal interaction.[16] Using questionnaire data collected from the corporate sector, for example, Hofstede identified New Zealand managers as relatively high in individualism, and above average in masculinity, although his study also suggested that differentials in power and authority tended to be played down in New Zealand.[17] In such workplaces, '[t]he masculine model is considered to be the professional model: this applies to communication, standards of behaviour, processes and practices in an organization. The cultural view is that men's ways of doing things are the standard or norm.'[18] In other workplaces – usually those where women are better represented in the workforce – relatively feminine or 'feminized discourse'[19] and ways of interacting may be more typical. These differently gendered expectations, and norms for appropriate ways of talking, influence perceptions of individual contributions to workplace interaction, and not surprisingly people respond to them in different ways. And while much of the management literature treats such patterns as established behaviours (despite their status as self-report data), I draw on them rather as evidence of ideologically produced norms which are useful for interpreting the complexities of workplace interaction, and especially for understanding the pressures on women and men to conform to particular ways of speaking at work.

In this book, then, I explore some of the diverse ways in which women and men in a number of mainly white-collar, professional, New Zealand organizations manage workplace discourse, and illustrate how they respond to the varied contextual conditions and communicative demands of their different 'communities of practice'.[20] The rest of this chapter first identifies features of feminine and masculine ways of talking, or 'feminized' and 'masculinized' discourse,[21] and then discusses the concept of the 'gendered' workplace. The analytical concepts and frameworks drawn on in the book are then outlined, followed by a brief description of the database and the methodology which was used to collect the data drawn on in the analysis. The chapter ends with an outline of the contents of subsequent chapters.

Gendered Ways of Talking

One dimension on which we are constantly, if generally unconsciously, assessing people's behaviour is that of contextual appropriateness in relation to gender norms. As with all social norms, this is often most evident when a person breaks or challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions about the way women or men 'should' behave. In a professional meeting I attended recently, for instance, a middle-aged American woman used a strong expletive to emphasize a point. The responsive facial expressions of several others present clearly indicated that she had challenged one of their norms for appropriate language in a white-collar, professional, formal context. While it is possible that the same word from a male would have elicited a similar reaction, it seemed to me that gender norms contributed to the emphatic effect.

In any conversation, people bring to bear their expectations about appropriate ways of talking, including appropriately gendered ways of talking. These expectations derive from our extensive experience of the diverse meanings conveyed by language in context. Gender is one particular type of meaning or social identity conveyed by particular linguistic choices, which may also concurrently convey other meanings as well.[22] So, for example, a compliment such as *nice jacket*, conveys positive affect, but may also convey an admiring or a patronizing stance, depending on who says it to whom and when. And it may also (indirectly) convey femininity in communities where compliments on appearance are much more strongly associated with women than with

Table 1.1 Widely cited features of feminine and masculine interactional styles (adapted from Holmes 2000a)

Feminine	Masculine
• facilitative	• competitive
• supportive feedback	• aggressive interruptions
• conciliatory	• confrontational
• indirect	• direct
• collaborative	• autonomous
• minor contribution (in public)	• dominates (public) talking time
• person/process-oriented	• task/outcome-oriented
• affectively oriented	• referentially oriented

men. In fact, it is well-accepted by linguists that 'the relationship between language and gender is almost always indirect'.[23] Ways of talking are associated with particular roles, stances (e.g. authoritative, consultative, deferential, polite), activities, or behaviours, and to the extent that these are 'culturally coded as gendered . . . the ways of speaking associated with them become indices of gender'.[24]

Features of interactional styles which may index femininity and masculinity in different social contexts have been identified in extensive research on language and gender over the last 30 years. Table 1.1 summarizes some of the most widely cited of these features.[25]

It is self-evident that

> a list such as this takes no account of the many sources of diversity and variation (such as age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on), which are relevant when comparing styles of interaction. It largely ignores stylistic variation arising from contextual factors, including the social and discourse context of an interaction, and the participants' goals. And there is no consideration of how such differences develop: fundamental underlying issues such as the social distribution of power and influence are inevitably factored out.[26]

What the list *does* provide is a useful summary of discursive strategies strongly associated with middle-class white men and women in the construction of their normative and unmarked gender identity; strategies which instantiate and reinforce 'the gender order'.[27] These form the discursive resources from which such individuals construct or interactionally accomplish the kind of gender identity they want to

convey.[28] A list is unavoidably crude, and hence the particular social meanings indexed by these features can only be interpreted in the specific communities of practice and discourse contexts in which they occur. Moreover, as noted, this particular list of features is class-based, and also obviously limited in terms of the relevance of such features to different ethnic groups.[29]

Extensive research throughout the last three decades has established some of the ways in which these strategies are expressed linguistically in a range of social settings, including professional, white-collar workplaces.[30] Facilitative devices, for instance, include tag questions (*isn't it? haven't they?*) and pragmatic particles (*you see*, *you know*) which may encourage the addressee's participation in the conversation. Encouraging supportive feedback often takes the form of positive minimal responses (e.g. *mm*, *yeah*). Indirect strategies include interrogatives (*could you reach that file?*) rather than imperatives (*pass that file*) for giving directives, and conciliatory strategies include mitigating epistemic modals (e.g. *might*, *could*), and attenuating pragmatic particles (e.g. *perhaps*, *sort of*) to soften and hedge requests and statements. These strategies are indexed as feminine in many social contexts.[31]

Similarly, the features listed as characteristic of masculine interactional style(s) are substantiated by a good deal of empirical research. In interviews, team discussions, classrooms, and department meetings, patterns of domination of talking time, disruptive interruption, competitive and confrontational discourse, have been noted as characterizing authoritative, powerful and assertive talk, and interactional styles conventionally associated with men rather than women, indicating why such features are so widely regarded as indexing masculinity, and associated with relatively masculine rather than feminine ways of speaking.[32] These are just some of the well-documented means of indexing gender and constructing a particular gender identity in many white-collar, professional workplaces.[33]

This wide-ranging research has thus established the broad parameters of what are widely regarded as normative, appropriate, and unmarked means of signalling gender identity in the workplace. These parameters provide a useful starting point for analysing specific instances of workplace talk. They constitute implicit, taken-for-granted norms for gendered interaction against which particular performances are assessed. As Swann (2002: 60) says, '[l]ocalized studies are framed by earlier research that established patterns of gender difference'.[34]

Example 1.2 illustrates some of the features (indicated in bold) indexing normatively feminine discourse.

Example 1.2[35]

Context: Meeting of 6 women in a government department. They have identified a problem with their recruitment processes. Leila is the section manager. [XF is an unidentifiable female voice.]

1.	**Lei**:	it's **a bit more of** a mess than what any of us thought . . .
2.	**Em**:	I've got Meredith's note about what she left behind . . .
3.		so I should be able to work it out from there
4.	**XF**:	mm but it's **just** time consuming **isn't it**
5.	**Lei**:	**well** it's more than time consuming because it **does look as if**
6.		**you know** when we went through those folders the other day
7.		and got all of those bright ideas for names
8.		**it looks** from looking at that **as if um**
9.		there's a lot of recruitment that **probably** hasn't happened
10.		**the problem is that** nothing's annotated to say
11.		whether the recruitment has actually occurred or not
12.	**XF**:	so that's you're stressing note keeping this /morning\
13.	**Lei**:	/yeah\
14.	**Em**:	we can check what recruitment letters Meredith sent out though
15.		cos they'll be in the system
16.	**Lei**:	but **I mean it's** /**may- it maybe**\
17.	**Em**:	/it's just a matter of someone\ going /and finding it\\
18.	**Lei**:	**it may be** /**easier** to\ write brand new recruitment letters saying **you know**
19.	**Em**:	we apologize if we wrote to you three months ago
20.	**Lei**:	yeah /( )\
21.		/[laughter]\
22.	**Ker**:	we **probably** won't be able to find them on the file ( )
23.	**Lei**:	Pauline will be able to find them
24.	**XF**:	um Meredith asked me not to keep quite a few letters

25.   she said once they were gone off the thing not to keep them so
26. **Lei**:   mm they would have to they'd be in hard copy ( )
27.   **I'm not going to worry too much /about that**
28. **XF**:   /[laughs]\\
29. **Lei**:   /**I think we might**\\ **find a way of** doing a letter
30.   /so what have we got\\
31.   **now I'm happy look shall we** make some decisions

This is a complex excerpt and I will not analyse it in detail here. However, it is clear from the components in bold type alone, that much of the exchange is expressed in terms that conform to relatively feminine norms for speaking. Focusing just on Leila, we see her criticizing the fact that the section's records are inadequate (lines 1, 9–11), and advocating a solution which others initially resist (line 18), two unwelcome discursive moves. In accomplishing these moves, she uses a high proportion of hedging devices (e.g. *well*, *um*, *looks as if*, *probably*), she uses passives, as well as *it* and *there* constructions which avoid allocating blame (e.g. lines 5–6, 8–9), and she uses the solidarity-oriented pronouns *we* and *us*, thus characterizing the problem (lines 1, 6), and especially the solution (lines 29, 30, 31) as shared. Moreover, she implies rather than asserts that she wants things to change; as XF correctly infers, *you're stressing note keeping this morning* (line 12).

This is perhaps the most unmarked way in which people do gender at work – through apparently unconscious choices which index gender identity by association with normatively gendered ways of talking. This is ordinary, appropriate talk between those who belong to this workplace: in this context it is not regarded as especially polite or particularly feminine. This is how people speak to each other for much of the time in this community of practice.[36] Well-established and familiar gendered discourse patterns are resources used to construct or display an appropriate professional identity in this workplace. If gender is omni-relevant, then familiarity with what is *unmarked* in relation to doing gender identity is a necessary basis for engagement in any social interaction, including talk at work. Identifying norms of interaction, including gender norms, is thus an important starting point in interpreting the social meanings encoded in workplace talk, and especially in identifying the significance of strategically marked vs. unmarked usage in signalling gender identity.[37]

Gendered workplaces

The notion of the gendered workplace, though an obvious simplification, is a useful starting point for analysis. As mentioned above, research in areas such as management and leadership has established that many New Zealand workplaces are perceived to be dominated by relatively masculine norms of interaction, and by masculine attitudes and values. So, for instance, Maier describes the cultural system that predominates in many New Zealand organizations as marked by 'an emphasis on objectivity, competition and getting down to business. Being hard-nosed and adversarial is taken for granted. Managers are expected to be single-mindedly devoted to the pursuit of organizational goals and objectives, to be competitive, logical, rational, decisive, ambitious, efficient, task- and results-oriented, assertive and confident in their use of power.'[38] Adopting a term from Sinclair, Su Olsson, Director of the New Zealand Centre for Women and Leadership, labels this an image of 'heroic masculinism', and analyses how it contributes to the dominant organizational mythology which marginalizes women in many workplaces.[39] We could describe such workplaces as gendered masculine.

Assigning a label such as 'masculine' or 'feminine' to a workplace is then a matter of how the dominant values and attitudes are perceived and enacted, a cultural, perceptual and structural issue, and, as discussed in earlier research, a matter of interactional style, rather than a reflection of the sex of those who work there.[40] The criteria are attitudinal, structural and stylistic rather than biological. More feminine workplaces, for instance, are characterized by 'openness of feelings, supportive social relationships, and the integration of private and work life';[41] by more democratic and non-hierarchical structures, and 'by a marked orientation towards collaborative styles and process of interaction, together with a high level of attention to the interpersonal dimension'.[42] Some men can and do interact at times and in ways that contribute to the perception of a workplace as more feminine, just as the behaviour of some women reinforces the view of their workplaces as particularly masculine. Moreover, different workplaces can be characterized as more or less feminine, and more or less masculine in different respects, and different contexts. So, in a particular workplace, meeting structures and interactional processes may conform to more masculine styles of interaction, while the way small talk is distributed

and its frequency may fit more conventionally feminine styles. Even the amount of pre-meeting talk tolerated after the scheduled starting time for the meeting may contribute to the construction of a more feminine vs. a more masculine community of practice. Furthermore, individuals may, of course, behave in ways indexing masculine or feminine ways of speaking at different points within the same interaction.[43]

At one end of the spectrum, gendered talk may be a quite explicit and conscious feature of workplace interaction. Kira Hall describes, for instance, how fantasy-line operators, offering telephone sex services, deliberately exploit stereotypical features of feminine talk in the enactment of their professional roles. In order to 'sell to a male market, women's pre-recorded messages and live conversational exchange must cater to hegemonic male perceptions of the ideal woman'.[44] At a different level, some workplaces may be perceived as more or less hospitable to women and to female values.[45] Other workplaces may be more masculine or even 'macho' in certain aspects of the workplace culture, making them uncomfortable places to work for those with different values, attitudes and preferred ways of interacting.[46] To a greater or lesser extent, then, people 'do gender' in the workplace; they engage in gender performances which have the potential to strengthen the 'gender order'.[47] Hence, although professional identity may be the most obviously relevant social identity in workplace interaction, the analyses in this book will demonstrate that gender identity is also an important component of workplace performance.

In concluding this section, it is worth noting that in many societies it is more masculine styles of interacting that tend to be more highly valued in workplace interaction, especially in more public and formal contexts. Luisa Martín Rojo and Conception Estaban comment on the fact that in Spain 'male style and norms are so deeply rooted in organizational culture', and they point to the perception of 'women's communicative behaviour as deviant'.[48] This is, of course, largely due to the fact that men have been in a majority in most workplaces until relatively recently, occupying nearly all the influential and powerful positions. Male models of success and masculine definitions of what is required to make progress at work have dominated in many work spheres.[49] Hence, unsurprisingly, masculine ways of interacting are strongly associated, especially in the business and management research literature, with effective workplace communication. The analyses in the chapters which follow offer an alternative model of successful workplace interaction.

It is also important to bear in mind that, despite the prevalence of this 'male-as-norm' model in much of the organizational communication literature, workplace interaction appears very much more complex when we examine the specific interactional norms of particular communities of practice in different organizations. Whether these are more authoritarian styles, indexed as masculine, or more collaborative and supportive styles, indexed as feminine, they provide the background or context within which individual women and men operate. The identification of the implicitly gendered, taken-for-granted, interactional norms of different communities of practice is thus a valuable exercise. But just as important is the analysis of the ways in which these norms are adhered to, exploited, or flouted from moment to moment in specific interactions.

A Dash of Theory

In analysing workplace interaction, my colleagues and I have consistently drawn on a variety of theoretical frameworks, and made use of a number of analytical concepts from socio-linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. The material drawn on in this book was collected using an ethnographic approach (see next section), and the dominant paradigm adopted in the analysis is social-constructionist combined with an interactional socio-linguistic framework. The concept of 'face', and especially the notions of positive and negative face, have also proved valuable.[50]

Both interactional socio-linguistics and social-constructionist approaches emphasize the dynamic aspects of interaction, and the constantly changing and developing nature of social identities, social categories and group boundaries, a process in which talk plays an essential part. Individuals are constantly engaged in constructing aspects of their interpersonal and intergroup identity, including their professional identity and their gender identity.[51] The words we select, the discourse strategies we adopt, and even the pronunciations we favour may all contribute to the construction of a particular social identity. Penelope Eckert's analysis of American high school adolescents, for instance, indicated how certain phonological variables functioned as distinguishing linguistic resources for those who engaged in 'cruising' urban centres and parks.[52] And lexical items such as *dude*,

man, *cuz* and *bro'* used as address terms in interaction play a part in constructing the socio-cultural identity of 'cool' young men in some New Zealand contexts.

Social constructionism is also basic to the notion of the *community of practice*, a concept which emphasizes process and interaction.[53] Workplace interactions tend to be strongly embedded in the business and social context of a particular work group, the community of practice, as well as in a wider socio-cultural or institutional order. This concept has proved very valuable in examining the way language contributes to the construction of gender identity as one aspect of social identity in the workplace. Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet define a community of practice (CofP) as follows:

> an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short, practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor. As a social construct, a CofP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages.[54]

The notion of 'practice' is central. The CofP approach focuses on what members do – the practice or activities which indicate that they belong to the group, and also the extent to which they belong. It takes account of the attitudes, beliefs, values and social relations which underlie their practice. Hence, the CofP model encourages a focus on 'not gender differences but the difference gender makes'.[55] It has proved very valuable in examining the issue of what people mean when they talk about a 'feminine' or 'masculine' workplace or gendered workplace culture. Using a CofP approach, the analysis focuses on gendered behaviours, or the ways in which people exploit gendered resources, rather than examining behaviour based on the gender of the speaker.

By focusing on 'practice', the detailed management of face-to-face interaction, a community of practice approach illuminates how language is used in the construction of salient social boundaries. So, for example, how do people include or exclude others from a discussion, or more subtly, how do they signal that someone is a member of the in-group or not. In-group humour can function to include or exclude people from a CofP, and nicknames and in-group language function