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Title: Resolving a gender and language problem in women's leadership:
Consultancy research in workplace discourse.

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Abstract

This paper considers the contribution that consultancy research might make to resolving communication problems that women have identified in their leadership practices. Within the intersecting fields of gender and language and workplace discourse, consultancy research – that is, practitioner-commissioned research to resolve work-related, communication problems – is still uncommon. This paper presents a study of Monika, a senior leader in an engineering company, who commissioned me to find out why she was experiencing communication problems with her teams. By using Interactional Sociolinguistic Analysis (ISA), I was able to show Monika how her authority was being resisted on gendered, linguistic grounds. In making the case for more consultancy research, I discuss how we might use insights from discourse analysis to offer guidance to practitioners seeking our help.

Key words:

Gender and language; workplace discourse; leadership; consultancy research; practitioner; communication; problem-solving.

Bionote:

Judith Baxter is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics at Aston University and specialises in the fields of sociolinguistics, gender, discourse analysis, and leadership language. She has published several books including *Positioning Gender in Discourse* (2003), *The Language of Female Leadership* (2010), *Double-voicing at Work: Power, Gender and Linguistic Expertise* (2014) and *Speaking as Women Leaders: Meetings in Middle Eastern and Western Contexts* (2016), all by Palgrave Macmillan. Her work on the language of women leaders has featured on TV, radio and the international press.

Resolving a gender and language problem in women's leadership: Consultancy research in workplace discourse.

Introduction

As a specialist in gender and language working in the field of workplace discourse, I have found a growing demand from the participants of my research projects to turn my discourse analytical insights into actions that benefit their professional practice. Specifically, my research on the discourse of business leaders has revealed the ways in which meetings become key sites for impeding the career progress of women (Baxter 2010; 2014). The interdisciplinary, linguistic fields that I bridge have very different experiences of what Roberts (2003) has termed 'consultancy' research. While consultancy-based research has a strong tradition in workplace discourse (e.g. Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken 2007; Holmes and Vine 2016; Roberts 2003; Sarangi and Candlin 2003), there is a negligible tradition of addressing and helping to resolve practitioner-commissioned, communication problems within the interrelated field of gender and language (G&L).

The main aim of this paper is to assess the potential contribution of consultancy research to the intersecting fields of gender and language and workplace discourse. I shall specifically explore how researchers might harness insights from discourse analysis to offer guidance to practitioners seeking our help. This discussion will refer to three types of problem-solving research relevant to discourse and communication. The first type is traditional, 'researcher-driven' endeavour with which the majority of scholars are familiar. The second type is 'consultative' research whereby scholars forge equal partnerships with practitioners and both parties negotiate separate and/or collective outcomes. Finally, the third is 'consultancy' research whereby the practitioner 'calls the shots' by commissioning a scholar to address, and where possible, 'solve' a particular problem. In this paper, I make a balanced case for the value of the third type, which has yet to make an impact on gender and language scholarship.

This paper illustrates consultancy research by investigating a communication problem that I was invited to address by a business practitioner. The case involves Monika, a senior woman engineer who had moved from an operational function in her company to a senior management position within the area of Research and Development (R&D). In a preliminary interview, Monika told me that she was encountering 'communication difficulties' in two separate contexts with colleagues. First, within senior management meetings (involving people of equal status or above her in the company hierarchy), she felt that her line manager did not take kindly to her interactional style and deployed 'blocking' tactics towards her. She wondered if he perceived her style to be too forceful and 'pushy'. Second, within meetings with members of her own team (her 'direct reports' in the hierarchy), she felt that her colleagues were resisting and undermining her interactional style, which she described as 'direct'. She speculated whether the reasons for her perceived difficulties were 'to do with gender': she had recently replaced a well-liked, 'company man' who had been long established in the post.

Monika's view that her interactional style was deemed problematic for workplace leadership is thoroughly reflected in gender and language literature (e.g. Angouri and Marra 2011; Baxter 2010; Holmes 2006; Koller 2004; Mullany 2007; Schnurr 2009). This suggests that some women leaders do not conform to the gendered expectations of workplaces, which traditionally support a strongly masculine leadership ethos (i.e. men in command, women in subservient positions). It is also well documented that women are often caught in a 'double-bind' as leaders: that is, if they use interactional practices conventionally associated with women (that is, indirect, cooperative, supportive), they are seen as less serious and robust as leaders, and if they use interactional practices normatively associated with men (tough, no-nonsense, direct), they are seen as threatening and aggressive (e.g. Baxter 2014; Holmes 2006; Kanter 1993). Such literature suggests that the double-bind constitutes a pervasive communication problem among many women leaders, and arguably, one of the barriers to reaching the most senior levels of management. For this reason, Monika's single case provided me with an excellent opportunity to utilise consultancy research to investigate a

perceived gender problem more widely. I had used various methods of discourse analysis as a key technique for revealing insights about communication issues in previous funded research (e.g. Baxter 2010; 2014), and on this basis, I selected interactional sociolinguistic analysis (ISA) to provide insights on the perceived difficulties Monika was experiencing (see p.000 below). In principle, my aim was to show that discourse analysis could offer Monika insights for comprehending the difficult behaviour of colleagues and possibly provide guidance to help her manage this.

I begin by examining three types of problem-solving research in the field of workplace discourse, and the particular value of the third, consultancy type. I then investigate the reasons for the relative absence of consultancy research in the field of gender and language. I move on to discuss Monika's case, the methodology selected, and present an ISA of Monika's interactions within several meetings. In light of my findings, I reflect on the potential contribution of consultancy research to the intersecting fields of workplace discourse and gender and language.

Problem-solving research in the field of workplace discourse

I have suggested above that there are three types of 'problem-solving' research that are familiar within a range of applied linguistic, discourse and communication fields. The first type of research – researcher-driven endeavour – is not principally concerned with solving the problems of practitioners in workplaces because it is scholarship-centred. Such research might comprise problems in workplace discourse usually identified by the scholar, which are then addressed theoretically, even if they are based on 'real' data from empirical studies (e.g. Angouri 2012; Heritage 2011; Holmes and Stubbe 2003). Similarly, there has been much researcher-driven endeavour under the banner of Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974) whereby real-life data such as meeting interactions, medical consultations or emergency phone calls are recorded and analysed for their practical interest and relevance. These data-driven studies are often used to show the mechanics or underlying rules of conversational interaction (that is, the orderliness of conversation), rather than to

produce insights from which practitioners can learn to improve their own practices. This first type of discourse analysis is therefore not used in the first instance to help solve the problems of professional people in the workplace, although this is beginning to change (e.g. Stokoe and Sikveland 2015).

The second type of problem-solving research in workplace discourse challenges the principle that scholarship comes first. The 'consultative' type of problem-solving research aims to construct *partnerships* between scholars and practitioners in order to meet mutually important goals such as an interest in improving workplace communication (e.g. Holmes and Vine 2016). 'Consultative' research has a specific mission to address and solve identified problems (e.g. Roberts and Sarangi 2003). Increasingly, direct problem-solving using this approach is happening in various applied linguistic fields such as second language learning (Burns 2010); feminist language planning (Milles 2011); health settings (Roberts 2003); speech and language therapy (e.g. Litosseliti and Leadbetter 2013); forensic linguistics (e.g. Grant 2010); and sales conversations (e.g. Stokoe and Sikveland 2015). In the UK, the current emphasis on 'impact' in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – a requirement upon all higher education institutions – is providing a strong motivation for linguists to engage in research that *does* build genuine partnerships in order to solve real-life problems (Martin 2011).

Third, and in contrast, the consultancy research paradigm is one which is practitioner-commissioned and driven, and may be delivered with or without a fee, perhaps depending on whether or not the real-world problem to be solved has been funded by a research grant-awarding body. Roberts (2003) discovered both benefits and challenges in the extensive consultancy research she carried out with the UK Royal College of General Practitioners. The long-term relationship she developed allowed for a deep understanding of the research context, although this required continuous (re)negotiation. While she was able to publish her results in academic as well as practitioner journals, the participants were not always happy with the ways in which they were represented in the findings. They often demanded prescriptive, 'how to' guidelines from the researcher rather than the descriptive insights that

linguists so often prefer to impart (see Cook 2003). Clearly a consultancy approach can partially circumscribe the relative freedom academics can claim when they initiate, drive and fund the research for themselves. In both the cases of Roberts (2003) and Holmes and Vine (2016), the use of the consultative and consultancy approaches led to further invitations by practitioners to address their professional problems. The benefit of building longer term relationships and gaining a reputation in consultancy research is that this may potentially lead to opportunities to conduct larger-scale, more intensive and rewarding research projects with professional partners. The possible downside is that scholars are no longer simply adding to the sum of human knowledge but serving the needs of individuals and organisations often with commercial and/or political agendas.

Problem-solving research in the field of gender and language (G&L)

In my view, there is relatively little problem-solving, practitioner-based research in G&L for several reasons. First, the field is strongly influenced by feminist theory with the critical mission of revealing gender inequalities and injustices that are routinely constructed within discourse. One area of study has been that of women's 'silence' in workplaces, both literally in terms of women's lack of vocality in forums such as meetings, and metaphorically in terms of their invisibility and exclusion at senior level (Cameron 2006; Vinnicombe et.al., 2015). However, the feminist mission fits uncomfortably with the agendas of professional practitioners based on effective service, client-provider relationships, productivity, profit, accountability, change management, and so on. G&L problems identified by practitioners in the workplace may either be intensely personal, such as (in the case of this paper) a leader who experiences linguistic discrimination on gender grounds, or alternatively, deeply structural, requiring substantive cultural changes in the way an organisation thinks and works. Today within the UK, and Europe more widely, there is greater pressure upon workplaces and specifically, Human Resources (HR) departments within organisations, to implement equality and diversity policies that actively tackle issues of gender inequality and discrimination (Vinnicombe et.al. 2015). However, in my experience, the ways in which workplace communication may discriminate

against women and, on occasions, men, remains a relatively niche area for practitioner-driven, research. In any case, organisations are far more likely to call upon experienced consultancy companies than to elicit the help of university-based, feminist linguists.

The second reason why there is little problem-solving research in G&L is that it remains primarily a sociolinguistic field, theoretical in its orientation to real-world problems. It is broadly divided between those scholars who adopt a bottom-up, ethnomethodological approach, and those who take a more critical, top-down approach to G&L study (Cameron 2005). While both approaches value the roles of real data and context, neither (in my view) has yet demonstrated a serious interest in directly solving G&L 'problems' within those contexts. Third, and finally, the post-modern, 'discursive turn' (Cameron 2005) taken by the field of G&L in recent years has weakened the feminist consensus around the kind of political activism that feminist linguists might take in practitioner contexts. Indeed, in reviewing the field's continued preoccupation with the 'real complexity and variability of the relationships between language, gender and sexuality', Cameron (2005: 500) argues that 'contemporary feminist researchers have become increasingly remote from the common-sense understandings with which most other people operate'. Indeed, I have found in my talks to business women's networks that while practitioners gravitate towards essentialist views of women and men as separate identity categories with distinctly different styles of speech and behaviour, recent G&L research emphasises the complex and diverse social construction of gender, which intersects with other identity categories such as sexuality, age, ethnicity, disability, and so on (Cameron 2005). As such, there might well be a clash between the expectations of practitioners and G&L researchers in analysing and theorising a perceived gender problem in which language is implicated. Such a clash has partly been resolved by pragmatic, postmodernist scholars such as Holmes (2007: 60), who argue for the use of a 'strategic essentialism' that 'put[s] women back at the centre of language and gender research'. She advocates that we can highlight discursive actions that penalise women in many workplace contexts, while documenting active discursive resistance to 'sexist behaviours'.

One area where there is considerable scope for G&L to become more involved in consultancy research is in the field of leadership. Practitioners are becoming aware that leadership is a gendered construct with serious implications for women wishing to progress to senior positions (Angouri and Marra 2011; Baxter 2010; Koller 2004; Mullany 2007; Schnurr 2009). Because leadership is still strongly associated with men and masculinity, women in leadership positions are marked as 'the other' in relation to the male norm and therefore judged to be less 'fit' or competent for the role. More recently, G&L scholars have posited that 'effective' leaders need to combine the complementary styles of goal-orientated or 'transactional' leadership with 'people-orientated' or 'relational' leadership (Holmes 2006). Such scholars, taking a social constructionist perspective, argue that it is not just that individual leaders may speak in gendered ways but that whole workplace cultures are gendered. Hence, there may be a mismatch between a leader's communication practices and those of the community or culture into which s/he enters. Furthermore, 'gendered discourses' – stereotyped ways of 'seeing' gender – may circumscribe the ways in which work colleagues speak and interact (Sunderland 2004). These serve to limit the range of subject positions within which women can operate (e.g. Baxter 2014; Kanter 1993; Mullany 2007). This rich literature connecting gender with leadership could be of great use to G&L scholars willing to conduct consultancy research, as this paper will show. The issue of a senior woman leader who perceived that she was being circumscribed by her line manager's discursive practices is at stake in the example of consultancy research I describe below.

The research study: the case of a senior woman engineer

Monika, a senior woman engineer, and new Head of Research and Development (R&D) in her company, invited me to conduct a single case study (Yin 2009) of her linguistic experience in senior management meetings. However, in order to encourage the participation of her colleagues, the study was designed to have outcomes and benefits for all participants. The stated aim was therefore to identify examples of good practice in team interactions in order to support the company's equality and diversity principles. To alleviate any possible sensitivities

from colleagues, I chose to adopt a constructive, 'appreciative inquiry' approach to the research (Holmes and Vine 2016), whereby the focus is upon what is done well – according to participant perceptions. Senior leaders were quite happy to take part in the study because, as they explained, their involvement showed evidence of the company's adherence to equality and diversity policies, now very much on the UK political and business agenda (Vinnicombe et.al. 2015). On the basis of a written explanation of the project's aims, I sought full ethical approval from all participants based on UK university guidelines. Accordingly, the details of all participants and reference to company activities have been anonymised.

While I have described the larger context of the research study, the focus of *this* paper is upon Monika's case study and my commission to examine the communication problems she had identified. Monika articulated two problems that she wanted me to address by providing insights and by proposing possible linguistic strategies that she could use in future meetings. The first was a problem she perceived that she experienced with her male line manager, Jim, in the context of senior management team meetings:

It is very rare for me to feel that my views and opinions are welcomed or appreciated and I just therefore think that it is just not worth me saying anything (.) I am digging myself a hole by saying things.

Monika considered that she was normally a very vocal, direct and (in her words) somewhat 'opinionated' person in senior team meetings, but that, over the course of the six months in her new R&D role, she had become more reserved, guarded and indirect. Part of the problem, she felt, was the leadership style of her line manager, who did not appear to welcome the expression of her opinions in meetings and used strategies to silence her.

The second problem was one that Monika perceived she experienced when chairing departmental meetings with her own team:

I have to watch myself as I used to be instinctively 'I'm leading'
(.) 'you are doing this and we've only got so many hours in the day'
(.) if you get [each colleague] separately they will actually do
something but you almost have to say them 'will you do this?' rather
than them actually volunteering (.) there were a number of them
sitting there and hoping things would happen.

In such meeting contexts, Monika suggested that she could not use her 'old style' of directly telling colleagues what to do or assigning them tasks, because this seemed to create resentment and resistance. Rather, she felt she was working hard to 'choose the right language' to encourage individuals to contribute to the extra, voluntary aspects of the department's work. Even where she used indirect, cajoling strategies, she did not feel she was successful, as she expresses above.

The case study adopted a qualitative research framework, governed by the principle of achieving a rich and detailed understanding of the complex lived experiences of research participants (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Methods comprised observation, audio-recording of meetings (as video was deemed by participants to be too intrusive), followed by one-to-one interview in order to capture colleagues' open-ended perceptions of 'good practice' in each meeting. I observed and audio-recorded several management and team meetings over a period of three months (six meetings in all), each of which lasted two to three hours. For the purpose of close and detailed discourse analysis, I have selected one extract from each of two senior management team meetings, and one extract from each of two departmental team meetings (four extracts in all), in which Monika herself had identified perceived communication problems.

In order to compensate for the lack of video-recording, I took notes during the meetings on a range of contextual and paralinguistic features such as body language, prosody and seating positions. With respect to 'the observer's paradox' (Labov 1966), the participants were certainly aware of my presence at the start of all meetings, but participants soon got

used to my regular presence. All the meetings were followed up with one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with both the chair of each meeting (Jim and Monika) and three to four colleagues who had volunteered. In these interviews, colleagues were asked to comment on instances of 'good' and 'less good' practice during the meeting: for example 'did the meeting go well today?'; 'who spoke effectively in your view?'). At no point were gendered constructs introduced into the question prompts, although at times interviewees 'oriented' to gender (Kitzinger 2007) by identifying their perspectives as male or female (e.g. 'It may be because I am a woman') or by using gendered evaluations of others' interactions (e.g. 'that was a typically male thing to say'). I aimed to be as self-reflexive as possible about the use of interview data, recognising that leaders' reflections did not necessarily offer transparent insights on their colleagues or on notions of good practice, but were partially constructed by the interactivity of the interview process (Talmy and Richards 2011). Both meeting and interview data were transcribed according to a basic conversation analysis transcription system (Jefferson 2004).

The data were analysed using ISA, which focuses on finely-grained micro-analysis of what speakers actually say at the level of lexical and grammatical choices, turn-taking, prosody and paralanguage. These help to provide rich and detailed information about speakers by means of 'contextualisation cues' (Gumperz 1982), which can index aspects of social identities such as gender, sexuality, class, ethnicity and status (Ochs 1992). Unlike Conversation Analysis (CA), ISA examines the role of contextualisation cues as a powerful means of indexing gender rather than dismissing cues unless they explicitly make gender 'relevant' (see Kitzinger (2007) for discussion). ISA is an appropriate method for consultancy research investigating gender issues because it does not *assume* that gender is always/wholly responsible for communication problems even if a practitioner perceives this to be the case. As an inductive method, meanings are allowed to *emerge* from the method of analysis which may or may not 'index' gender. Ochs (1992) points out that 'linguistic features may index social meanings (e.g. stances, social acts, social activities), which in turn help to constitute gender meanings. Ochs writes of a 'tacit understanding' that gender is present within an interaction,

rather than gender being made explicitly relevant by a participant within an interaction, and it is this approach that the paper adopts. If there is sufficient, emergent evidence within the discourse analysis that an interaction is gendered, I suggest that this conclusion may be reasonably drawn. I have borrowed the occasional term from CA's metalanguage to describe features of turn-taking where appropriate.

There are two primary reasons for presenting the analysis below. The first is that ISA reveals the precise and intricate ways in which Monika's authority is linguistically and discursively resisted by her colleagues. The second is to demonstrate how a detailed analysis of this type can be used in consultancy research to identify communication problems with practitioners. Indeed, I shared with Monika the following transcripts of significant moments where communication problems were highlighted; this evidence gave us the opportunity to explore the various ways in which she could overcome these problems in future business meetings (see the discussion section below).

Analysis

The senior management team meeting (SMT)

The SMT meeting was a monthly forum in which the 15 heads of different departments in the company met to discuss routine business matters across the organisation. The meeting was chaired by the Head of Division, Jim, and all the participants were male except Monika and Jim's Personal Assistant (PA). The meeting consisted largely of monologic reports from the different areas after which colleagues around the table would be invited to comment. The meeting is notable because Monika makes only one substantial contribution. She is asked to report back on issues from the R&D department, which she does relatively briefly. She then makes a further, short, voluntary contribution here:

Extract 1: *(Mon=Monika; Jim=Monika's line manager)*

1 **Mon:** in view of what we've been saying about the forthcoming audit
2 it's quite important we get something in place (.) we feel (.)
3 pretty swiftly

4 (5.0)

5 **Jim:** very good any (.) any comments? questions? discussion?=
6 **Mon:** =it's a question of how we do it in practice (5.0)
7 **Jim:** can we agree that you being responsible for R&D will go forward
8 and develop platforms?=
9 **Mon:** =well I can't do it for the research function leads (.) well if
10 you wish me to do it for the research leads I don't think I can
11 do it for heads in other areas (*shakes her head*)

12 (10.0)

13 well if you wish me to do it I am quite happy to do it and I
14 can work with colleagues to do it if you wish
15 **Jim:** yes yes it would be good if you would do
16 **Mon:** OK OK

In lines 1–3, Monika summarises the main outcome of her report on R&D activities: that she has found a lack of formal role descriptions for the people in her department, which, she argues, will need to be written quickly in view of the forthcoming company audit. She also states that there is a lack of role descriptions across the entire organisation. After this utterance, there is a palpable, five-second silence in line 4 as Jim, the Chair, fails to reply instantly. His silence might index a sense that he is being criticised because silences of this length were unusual in the meeting as a whole. When he does reply, his response is conventionally polite ('very good') and, according to meeting procedure, he invites other colleagues to comment. In line 6, Monika instantly latches on to the end of his question, thus cutting off the chance for other colleagues to respond, by asserting what the 'question' to be answered should be. Once again, there is a five-second silence in response to her categorical assertion, and we might speculate why this might be so. It is possible that Jim is waiting for other colleagues to respond to her point, and when this does not happen, he responds in line

7 with an apparently disconnected answer. Rather than agreeing with Monika or attempting to answer 'what might be done in practice', he then uses the inclusive form of a question ('can we agree...?') seeking to make her responsible for the issue she has raised. It is unclear whether the 'we' means the two of them or everybody else around the table, who remain conspicuously silent. Monika latches to Jim's question in line 9 with a 'dispreferred response' (Sacks, Schegloff and Jespersen 1974) by initially rejecting Jim's request but then backtracking on this, and making a concessionary agreement in lines 10-11. Monika's language here indexes a combination of certainty and uncertainty in her relationship with her line manager: she is certain enough to cut in and reject requests he makes, but not certain enough to carry that stance through.

For a third time in line 12, there is an even longer pause of ten seconds, lengthy in a meeting by any measure. This may well index the confusion that her response has generated in Jim and other colleagues about how exactly to respond. Given the embarrassingly long silence (I felt so as an observer), it is Monika not Jim who fills the verbal gap. If Jim had wanted to make Monika feel uneasy about failing to agree to his request, he appears to have succeeded: in lines 13-14, she hesitatingly agrees, indexed by her repetition of the conditional phrase 'if you wish' and a rather flustered manner. In line 15, it is notable that there is no pausing between Monika's offer and Jim's agreement to her offer. He agrees instantly ('yes yes'), affirming her offer, and the matter is apparently closed.

In this meeting as a whole, the communication problem Monika perceives is primarily one of her own silence because, by her own admission, she makes only one substantial contribution. It is obviously difficult to conduct a discourse analysis on a participant's silence in a meeting other than to analyse their body language closely if it is deemed interesting. Of course there may be many reasons for a person's silence in a single meeting: they may have nothing to say; they may feel unwell; they were conscious of being observed on that day. Indeed, not all the participants in the meeting spoke out volubly, although no one was conspicuously silent. As briefly reviewed on p.000 above, the issue of silence has been extensively debated in the G&L field both in its literal and figurative senses. Monika was clear

in her interview that silence was not typical of her, indicating that the interaction in this extract was highly constrained:

(.) in the normal course of events in different fora with my experience on international events I would have chipped in and said 'I remember when I was doing x (.) y and z I have that experience (.) I don't know whether it still applies now but does it help the discussion? (.) I don't chip in anymore because I know it is not appreciated

In the following extract from another meeting in the corpus, Monika experiences a related communication problem: an explicit attempt by her boss to silence her. Here, Monika attempts to make a point about the role of the financial report in SMT meetings. The finance director has just finished giving this report, which has mainly comprised facts and figures in a power point presentation. Jim then asks the team members whether they have any questions on this report, and Monika is the first to speak.

Extract 2: (Rog=Roger; deputy to Jim)

- 1 **Mon:** I just wonder how useful the report is in its present
2 form=
3 **Jim:** =what do you mean?
4 **Mon:** well: (.) it is very good about telling us how the money is
5 distributed among departments but b- but not at how we arrive at
6 such decisions (.) we need to be better at this surely (.) what
7 do other people think=
8 **Jim:** =I think the report tells us what we need to know=
9 **Rog:** =yes indeed yes indeed
10 **Mon:** (2) I'm not sure it doesn't obscure certain things
11 **Jim:** (*sounding impatient*) what do you mean? It is perfectly
12 transparent=
13 **Rog:** =indeed (.) absolutely

14**Jim:** (1) any other comments on this? (*His gaze sweeps the group*) (5)
15 no? good (.) can we move on
16**Mon:** OK OK I'm chipping in in my usual fashion

In lines 1-2, Monika makes a metapragmatic point, not about the content of the report (as might have been expected by Jim's question) but about the value of the report as a whole. She does not develop her point, or rather, she is not allowed to develop her point because Jim latches his turn to hers with the direct question, 'what do you mean'? In lines 4-7, Monika uses the discourse marker 'well: (.)' to buy her time before she uses an antithetical structure to set out her argument in miniature: the case for the report, the case against it, and finally, her conclusion after weighing up both sides. She finishes by attempting to invite other participants to share their views. Jim closes off this possibility by making a categorical assertion that explicitly contradicts Monika's point, which is immediately endorsed by second-in-command, Roger. Monika does not respond immediately (line 10), but when she does, she develops her previous criticism in a highly hedged form ('I'm not sure it doesn't...'). This use of 'negative politeness' (Brown and Levinson 1987) indexes a sense of uncertainty in her attempt to lessen the effect of the criticism upon her interlocutors. In line 11, Jim once again latches on to her turn, first by challenging its sense and then by denying its implication. The conversational pattern above is repeated when Roger immediately endorses his line manager's point with the affirmative particles: 'indeed (.) absolutely'. In line 14, the sense that Jim may be irritated with Monika's line of argument, possibly because it implies a criticism of his own managerial practice and authority as the chair, is indicated by his question, 'any other comments on this?' This question moves the focus of attention away from Monika, preventing her from saying more, and enabling him to move the meeting on to other matters. Monika responds not by challenging Jim's move to block her opinions, but by making a self-deprecatory comment: 'OK OK I am chipping in in my usual fashion.'

In this extract, Monika is fully prepared to speak but is not given the linguistic space to express and explain what might be an important strategic issue. Her line manager appears to be verbally blocking her access to a conversational turn in which she might make a valuable contribution to management thinking. This attempt to block Monika from speaking is actively supported by Roger, Jim's second-in-command, which makes her attempt to express her opinions substantially more difficult, especially as she is not apparently supported by any other member of the group. We can only speculate that Jim sees Monika as a threat to his authority, as conveyed by another team member's comment (gathered at the interview stage):

OK yes the strategy we are devising is a problem but bringing someone to account over that in front of everybody else↑ is not quite the best way to do it (.) that is the sort of thing that happens between him and Monika quite frequently

The Departmental Team Meeting

The following extract is taken from a monthly, department 'business' meeting chaired by Monika, consisting of about 20 colleagues who were her direct reports, 12 of whom were men and eight of whom were women. The pattern of the meeting was to follow a strict agenda involving reports from people with role responsibilities and discussion of specific issues. In this meeting, Monika is reflecting aloud on whether there is a need to set up a separate research group that meets to discuss strategic rather than business issues.

Extract 3: (Bob=team member, male)

1 **Mon:** well:: (.) this is why I was just wondering (.) do we need more
2 meetings↑ (.) do we need more focused meetings↑ (.) do we need
3 a separate discussion so this is more meaningful↑ (.) the
4 subgroup to work up what we want to see on this:: (.) that's
5 then meaningful quickly (.) especially for getting it in
6 advance (.) rather than (.) trying to discuss this sort of

7 thing in a forum this size (.) I'm I'm just (.) feeling (2)
8 that this is my s::econd or third meeting (.) that it's:: (.)
9 we want more:: (.) we want more discussions (.) we want more
10 detail (.) more understanding (2) what do we er↑ (3) if we're
11 gonna stop (2) if we break it down yes:: (2) it then starts to
12 open up a bigger debate (2)

13 Bob: but some things are just for information (.) and:: I think it's
14 useful to receive this information (.)

15 Liz: [hmm

16 Mon: [okay

17 Bob: [and the format of it (.) it can be for information that
18 doesn't mean it's not valuable (.)=

19 Mon: =okay

20 Bob: =and it and it gives us some context (.) and I think we should
21 keep it

22 Mon: good (.) okay (.) so we keep it↑

In this monologic sequence from lines 1-12, Monika reflects aloud about the need for a new sub-group by asking three rhetorical questions in a row. It is unclear at this point whether she asks these in order to prompt discussion or to invite support for her ideas. She uses metapragmatic particles such as 'I am wondering' to index her thought processes. This technique, in theory, means that her ideas are open to discussion rather than predetermined proposals. From lines 4-7, her intention becomes clearer as she then evaluates her questions with the repeated adjectival phrase 'that's then meaningful quickly', balancing this as a positively charged utterance against the negatively charged utterance 'rather than (.) trying to discuss this sort of thing in a forum this size'. In line 7, she appears to change tone and semantic direction by stepping out of the frame of this argument with the use of more metapragmatic particles such as 'I'm I'm just (.) feeling (2) that this is my s::econd or third meeting'. This hints at a desire to be open with her team about her thinking processes and to

share them, rather than simply to tell them what to do. She follows this in lines 9-12 with a set of answers that do appear to answer the rhetorical questions she has posed earlier. For example, to the question 'do we need a separate discussion so this is more meaningful' (line 3), she then answers 'we want more discussions (.) more detail' in line 12. However the possible effect of this is to close down group discussion about the issue as she has already provided team members with the answers. It turns out that this preamble is far less open to shared discussion than team members might have initially thought.

In the dialogic section of this extract from lines 13-22, Bob appears to disagree with Monika that the current business meeting format has no value. Using the adversative conjunction 'but', he makes a series of points to defend another purpose of departmental meetings: the need to impart information. It is not clear whether this is a point challenging or agreeing with Monika's argument for 'more discussions' in other fora, but his series of points are constructed as a disagreement (for example, his use of double negatives in line 18: 'it doesn't mean that it is not...'). At this point, Monika uses a series of agreement particles to show support for Bob's objection and closes down this line of argument.

We could speculate that, in this sequence, Monika is tentatively throwing out suggestions in the hope that one might 'land' with her team, but none does. Alternatively, we might argue that she is giving a false sense of making an issue open for team discussion. While she offers lots of openings to which members might conceivably respond, her monologic, hermetically sealed, question-response structure closes off the need for discussion. Whatever the motive, Bob does raise an objection to her perceived argument, and she is quick to acquiesce to his counter-argument.

In the following extract from a separate meeting, Monika is once again trying to rustle up volunteers for a new working group on strategic research issues, and ironically, this has generated an informal discussion on reforming communication matters. The extract has been selected because it highlights the problem upon which Monika invited me to focus: her perceived difficulty in restraining herself from giving direct orders and in encouraging colleagues to volunteer freely for extra work.

Extract 4: (Mon=Monika; Sue=team member, female; Liz= team member, female)

1 **Sue:** =because normally (.) the emails (.) I
2 mean there [are
3 **Mon:** [Sue↑(.) can I suggest that we don't take the actions
now (.)
4 **Sue:** [no no (.)
5 **Mon:** [or discuss it now please
6 **Sue:** I'm just saying we just need to (.) communication again (.) is
7 an issue really=
8 **Liz:** =so we'll talk=
9 **Mon:** =are you volunteering to join the [group↑=
10**Voices:** [hehehheh
11**Sue:** =no no (.)
12 heheh] (.) I'll come back later

In line 1, Sue, a team member, is in mid-flow in her argument about the problems of using emails and the possibility of changing team practices in email use. Monika interrupts her mid-sentence, which CA might interpret as a violation of a turn as it does not respect a turn – transition relevance point (Sacks et.al. 1974). This use of interruption could index a number of contextual features such as Monika's superior status, a degree of disagreement, strong emotion or simply a misreading of an utterance boundary. Monika's utterance suggests the first of these features is most likely in her use of direct address ('Sue↑(.)') followed by a mitigated command expressed as a question, and by Sue's apparent acquiescence to this command in the ambiguously used, negative agreement particles ('no no'). In line 5, Monika drives home her command by adjoining it with a second instruction, with the politeness particle 'please' used here as an intensifier (House 1989). Sue's use of the words 'no no' prefigures her next turn in lines 6-7, where she repeats her argument, perhaps indicating some resistance to being told what to do. Liz, a fellow team member, appears to support and build on Sue's resistance by articulating what the proposed 'action' would be. This provides Monika with a

humorous opportunity to elicit support for volunteers, but the reaction of the rest of the team is not to volunteer but to laugh. This indexes that Monika's attempts to get volunteers may be viewed as a running joke in the team. Sue jokily rejects the request and returns to her theme of pursuing her discussion about email reform.

While this sequence ends as a good-natured exchange, Monika has used a combination of quite assertive language and more light-hearted encouragement to achieve her leadership goal of getting team members to volunteer for the new group, but ultimately she is unsuccessful. The failure of colleagues to volunteer, and the sense that this is part of a running joke in the team, indicates that this could index a more serious leadership problem for Monika. A clue to the specific communication problems experienced by Monika in these two extracts is also suggested by one of the team members during a follow-up interview:

She always seems to be beside the point and creating these incredibly ingenious schemes that are a lot of work for other people that aren't really achieving anything very much so she generates all the work for other people that never seems to be very effective in achieving this

Discussion and concluding remarks

In conducting the case study, I identified various areas of challenge and benefit to scholars carrying out consultancy research with a combined focus on workplace discourse and gender and language. The first challenge I found was the issue of participant sensitivities in conducting research where findings about gender relations may be quite threatening. Monika had bravely commissioned me to carry out research which had a particular focus on her own perceived effectiveness as a leader. She knew that this might be a difficult and emotional project because she was upset by the animosity towards her interactional practices both from her line manager and her own team members (as demonstrated by the interview data above). As such, I judged the problems she was encountering to be partially to do with gender but contextually very complex. For example, in the meeting data analysis above, there is discourse

analytical evidence to suggest that Monika moves uncomfortably between assertive, transactional practices normatively coded 'masculine', to more concessionary, relational practices normatively coded 'feminine' (Holmes 2006). This linguistic versatility can be perceived, according to Holmes, as a leadership skill, but in this context, appeared to offer weak versions of each practice. The analysis shows how the uneasy shifts she makes between the two types of gendered practices appear to unsettle and unnerve her colleagues, and this was one of various areas that I felt Monika would benefit from my feedback and guidance. While this may be a reasonable interpretation of the data, the challenge for the researcher is that feedback based on such an interpretation can seem highly personal and delicate to deliver. My decision in this case was to meet Monika to discuss the insights together, rather than to deliver a detached, written report (as she had requested).

Linked to this, the second challenge of consultancy research concerns the ways in which linguists feel theoretically disposed to give practitioner feedback and guidance. Cook (2003: 15) reviews how the field of applied linguistics conventionally favours the use of *description* in that 'all variants [of language use] are equally valid simply by virtue of the fact that they occur, and that no one form is any more or less correct than another', rather than *prescription*. A prescriptive stance would cast the 'researcher as expert/consultant and agent of change' (Sarangi and Candlin 2003: 277), able to give 'hot feedback' to practitioners where required, and sets of linguistic tips or guidelines for longer term, good practice. Researchers are entitled to use evaluative terms such as 'less' or 'more effective' with practitioners, without having to qualify them with heavy use of epistemic modality. However this raises the issue of how such judgements are made, and upon which criteria. Such decisions about what forms of feedback and metalanguage are most appropriate are probably best determined within the local context through close consultation in advance between researchers and practitioners. In Monika's case, the reference points used for assessing her interactions were drawn from gender and language research evidence, such as that cited on pp.000 – 000 above. However, in descriptive spirit, the reference points were offered not as 'how to' guidance but rather as interesting insights that could illuminate or question Monika's interactional practices.

It is here that the method of discourse analysis can be identified as a great benefit to scholars taking a consultancy research to communication problems. I shared with Monika transcripts of significant moments where communication problems were highlighted (including those above). I invited her to comment on the interactions, and where she found this difficult, I utilised simple, descriptive metalanguage ('here you interrupted...') to describe the process of the interaction. I then asked her to speculate what the effects on colleagues might be of using certain interactional strategies. Where the effects lead to obvious colleague disengagement or disagreement, I asked her to consider what alternative strategies she might have used. The question 'how might you have conducted this moment in the interaction differently?' and 'what could you have said here' helped Monika to think about the range of alternative strategies with the benefit that she was able to appreciate discourse as a potentially rich set of resources with manifold functions and effects depending on context. For example, when we discussed Extract 1 above in which she felt pressurised by Jim to take on considerable extra work, she was able to see that the cause of this might have been her failure to resist her line manager's use of extended silences. We discussed together the possible effects of alternative, more proactive responses to Jim in the future, such as sitting out a silence, asking for his opinion or asking other colleagues to give their views on the matter. In Extract 2, we discussed how she wanted to avoid ending an exchange with a self-deprecatory comment as this appeared to weaken her position further.

The use of transcripts of significant moments where gender discrimination is constructed through routine interactions is a feedback method that could also be deployed with whole teams. By showing a team how small moments of interaction within meetings can construct gendered practices, this can prompt peer discussions about how 'unconscious bias' (as practitioners term it) is perpetuated within workplace discourse. However there is a strong risk that individual participants, such as Jim, might feel exposed before their colleagues by this critical approach unless it is handled with consideration and care. In such circumstances, an 'insight-based' approach to feedback that *bridges* the descriptive-prescriptive dichotomy seems essential. Researchers should encourage practitioners to generate their own insights,

but also make these insights absolutely explicit, explaining how these might be applied to future practices. When I gave feedback to the senior management team, I asked participants to discuss transcripts in pairs, to focus on 'acts of leadership' and to discuss what constituted 'good practice' in their view. I found that this open-ended approach, which avoided direct references to gender, initiated discussion of the very issues I had been concerned to raise. In Extract 1, participants asked whether Monika was pressurised to take on the extra work, or whether she unwittingly volunteered to do it, and if so, why that happened. A male colleague suggested that it was because 'she was the only woman in the room', which generated vigorous discussion. Following this, I clarified the insights learnt about linguistic practices with references to gender and language theory. While team responses were productive in this case, researchers may certainly need professional training to help them handle this type of dissemination of consultancy research with diplomacy and skill.

Finally, consultancy research raises the question of how to strike a balance between the scholarly interests of the researcher (in my case, a feminist concern to investigate the 'silencing' of talented women in leadership contexts), and the transactional expectations of the practitioners who have commissioned the research and expect quantifiable outcomes. In my case, I resolved the dilemma by not asking for a consultancy fee. In return for delivering individual, team and corporate insights on equality and diversity practices, I was given permission to speak and write about the research study findings in academic forums. Overall, however, consultancy research can serve a greater mission. The use of discourse analytical skills enables the gender and language researcher to intervene and make a difference to the lives of women who are experiencing communication problems in the workplace. In my case, it encouraged one woman to reflect upon and change her practices, and two teams of colleagues to understand how gender discrimination can be constructed in the smallest moments of discursive interaction.

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Notes

I have used a basic Conversation Analysis transcription system (Jefferson 2004) for both interview and meeting data:

- (.) micro-pause
- (1) pause of specified number of seconds
- [overlapping speech or interruption
- (*laughs*) paralinguistic features
- emphasis
- :: drawn out speech
- ↑ rising intonation
- = latching