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‘If you had only listened carefully....’: The discursive construction of emerging leadership in a UK women-only management team.

Abstract

Increasingly, feminist linguistic research has adopted a discursive perspective to learn how women and men ‘do’ leadership in gendered ways. ‘Women’ as a social category is made relevant to this study by virtue of the lack of female senior leaders in UK businesses (Sealy and Vinnicombe 2013). Much previous research has analysed leadership discourse in mixed gender groups, relying on theories which imply comparisons between men and women. Using an Interactional Sociolinguistic approach, this study aims to learn more about how women perform leadership in the absence of men by analysing the spoken interactions of a women-only team who were engaged in a competitive, leadership task. The analysis reveals that the women accomplish leadership in multiple and complex ways that defy binary gendered classifications. Nonetheless, there is a distinctive gendered dynamic to the team’s interactions which, it is argued, might be disadvantageous to women aspiring to senior positions.

Keywords: Gender, leadership language, discourse, management team meetings, feminist linguistics, Interactional Sociolinguistic analysis.

Introduction

Research on gender, language and leadership within workplace settings has steadily grown in recent years, and has increasingly adopted a discursive perspective of ‘doing’ gendered leadership (Mullany 2011). According to this perspective, every time a leader speaks, s/he is negotiating what it means to be a leader by using a range of discursive strategies such as politeness, humour and authoritative language to accomplish leadership goals (Clifton, 2012). The selection of particular discursive strategies both index and interact with a range of wider, socio-cultural aspects of identity such as gender, age, class, ethnicity and status, which may either enhance or constrain the ways in which senior people ‘do’ leadership

within their organizations (Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson and Planken, 2007). Thus, through the way leaders speak and interact with colleagues, they are continuously negotiating and managing their professional identities, profiles and relationships (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). While the discursive perspective of identity construction has been embraced by gender and language scholars, the case still needs to be argued in interrelated fields investigating leadership in organisations. Clifton (2012) among others, has called for more studies taking a discursive approach to understanding leadership, and this paper contributes to that call.

In the following study, I will investigate how leadership emerges and is performed through discourse within a particular context of interest to feminist linguistics. Talbot (2010: 16) defines the latter discipline as ‘feminist interest...in the complex part language plays, alongside other social practices and institutions, in reflecting, creating and sustaining gender divisions in society.’ While the fields of gender and language and feminist linguistics are closely allied, the latter offers a specifically ‘critical’ perspective on text and talk (Talbot, 2010: 118). I have sought in recent work (e.g. Author, 2010; 2011; 2013) to provide feminist linguistic insights on the business and professional issue of why so few women in the UK, Europe and internationally progress to senior leadership level. For women leaders, who remain in a clear minority compared to men in UK organizations despite a relatively equal presence in the workforce (e.g. Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013), the doing of leadership continues to present distinctively gendered challenges. Scholars of gender in organisations suggest that this is because leadership is still viewed as a distinctly masculine construct (e.g. Billing, 2011; Sheridan, McKenzie and Still, 2011; Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2013), which continues to define itself on the basis of a person’s presumed gender. Thus, gender as a socially constructed category (Crawford 1995) is made strongly relevant as a topic of research within the context of business leadership.

From a discursive perspective, relatively little is known about how *women* produce themselves as leaders and subsequently ‘do’ leadership with colleagues, especially when they speak and interact in the context of a women-only management team. There are two

reasons for this in my view. First, most previous studies are based on *mixed* leadership team contexts where women are typically in the minority (e.g. Angouri 2011, Author 2010, Holmes 2006, Mullany 2007, Schnurr 2009). There appears to be very little research on women-only senior teams *per se* (e.g. Author 2006; Edelsky 1981; Holmes 2008). Secondly, much past theorization of women performing leadership is founded on an understanding of women's linguistic practices in relation to, in comparison with, or in *contradistinction* to men (see next section). Even research studies adopting a social constructionist perspective have focused on (an often) binary concept of gendered 'communities of practice' (CofPs; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1998) whereby women and men adopt variable linguistic practices according to whether they are positioned within a predominantly feminine or masculine workplace culture (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Holmes 2006; Schnurr, 2009). While celebrating women's (and men's) admirable versatility in deploying a linguistic repertoire that shifts according to whether they are working within a more feminine or more masculine CofP, this line of research is arguably defined by its internal logic that linguistic repertoires are gendered in this graded way.

This paper has two interrelated aims. The first is to learn more about how leadership emerges and is constructed from a discursive perspective, and hence, what a leader 'looks and sounds like' in the context of an all-women team. The second is to focus upon the chosen linguistic strategies of a team of women managers, without making explicit comparisons or evaluations on the basis of presumed gender differences, unless 'linguistic features....index gendered meanings' (Ochs, 1992: 341). By 'spotlighting' women, this study should make more visible the multiple and diverse ways in which women's leadership identities emerge and are enacted. The paper draws upon a case study of how a team of six women middle managers on a Masters of Business Administration (MBA) course speak and interact while conducting a competitive, leadership team task. I will explore the implications of the analysis both for scholars of discourse and communication, as well as for business professionals themselves –especially, future women leaders. While recognizing that it is not possible to generalize from a single case study of this type, what insights can we draw from

the leadership practices of this particular women-only team? And what might we learn about women's lack of progress to senior positions in the business world?

Leadership

Definitions of leadership in this paper are drawn from research that has seen the emergence of discursive approaches in applied linguistics, social psychology, gender and language and organisational studies (e.g. Angouri and Marra, 2011; Author, 2010; Clifton, 2012; Holmes, 2006; Olsson 2006; Sealy and Vinnicombe 2013; Sinclair, 1998; Wodak 2003). Central to the discursive approach is the view that leadership is not necessarily the property of one person, can be distributed and shared among a team, and can 'change hands' among different members of a team during the course of a discussion. Accordingly, the term 'leader' is at times conceptualized as a leadership role, but at other times conceptualized as socially situated sets of linguistic practices. Informal roles (or identity positions that speakers take up) such as leader, follower, supporter, adversary and so on, are viewed here as resources or *strategies* for self-identity and provide a sense of distinct individual identity within a group (Kets de Fries et al, 2010).

From a discursive perspective, leadership is viewed as types of verbal and non-verbal actions that leaders accomplish in their daily professional interactions, often in interactive forums such as business meetings. Svennevig (2011: 18) for example, proposes that 'leadership is associated with actions that gain predominance in mobilizing action and shaping organizational reality'. He provides instances of leadership acts such as the chairing of a meeting which allows a leader to gain a predominant position in the interaction by setting the agenda and managing access to 'the floor': that is, the available linguistic space in which participants are permitted to speak. Scholars have suggested that leadership is manifested linguistically through 'dynamic performance' (Schnurr and Zayts, 2011: 40): that is the ways in which interlocutors co-construct meanings through the turn-taking process of conversation. Schnurr and Zayts (2011: 41) propose that 'leader identities are constructed by interlocutors through supporting and reinforcing, as well as challenging and subverting

discourse practices'. So, for example, if one person is constantly being supported and reinforced by other speakers in a meeting, s/he is more likely to assume a stable and authoritative leadership identity than a person whose views are constantly being challenged.

Finally, a discursive perspective has an interest in the way in which language is utilised to negotiate (gendered) power relations between speakers, which are constantly shifting and subject to contestation. In this paper, where I imply or refer to the construct of 'effective' leadership, this is defined in terms of the extent to which a member of a leadership team has a voice (literally and metaphorically), which has clear influence with colleagues in order to maintain working relationships and persuade people to get business done with a successful outcome.

Gender, language and leadership

Previous research on gender, language and leadership has tended to investigate women's leadership from three broad perspectives: 1) leadership as a masculine construct; 2) differently gendered leadership styles; and 3) gendered repertoires and discourses. The first two perspectives assume gender difference along essentialist, binary lines, whereas the third tends to problematize gender as a social construct. After reviewing these three perspectives briefly, I will make the case for the third as the most pertinent to an understanding of the discursive construction of leadership in a UK women-only team.

The first perspective that leadership is intrinsically masculine has been widely discussed in gender, language and leadership (e.g. Author 2010, Cameron, 2006; Holmes 2006; Koller, 2004; Mills, 2006; Mullany, 2007; Schnurr, 2009). Because leadership is historically associated with masculinity, women in leadership positions are marked as 'the other', the exception to the male norm and therefore judged to be less fit or competent for the role (Schnurr, 2009: 106). The prevailing stereotype is one which assumes that an 'effective' leader uses language that is authoritative, assertive, adversarial, competitive, task-focused, goal-orientated, and single-minded (Bass, 1998, Holmes, 2006, Sinclair, 1998). As the marked group, women thus have to work twice as hard as men to gain the same respect

as leaders, and are often compelled to sound tough, calculating and in control – which is then perceived negatively by colleagues (Muhr 2011).

The second perspective that women and men have differently gendered leadership styles is based on ‘gender difference’ theories proposing that women and men have been socialized into different yet complementary sub-cultures (e.g. Maltz and Borker, 1982; Coates, 1995, Tannen, 1995). In this vein, Vinnicombe and Singh (2002: 121-2) argue that whereas men gravitate towards more ‘transactional’ or goal-orientated styles of leadership within hierarchically ordered team structures, women gravitate towards ‘transformational’ or ‘change-orientated’ leadership styles within egalitarian-based team structures. These styles are mirrored in the use of differently gendered leadership language. Thus, men’s language constitutes leadership in a hierarchical, competitive way with individuals positioned either as potential leaders or subordinates. In contrast, women’s language constitutes leadership in a more distributed, co-constructed way with individual speakers positioned more equally so that everyone potentially has a voice (e.g. Bass, 1998). Helgesen (1990: 27) argues that women are more proficient than men in the use of relational or ‘expressive’ styles of leadership, based on personal respect, openness, mutual trust, social responsibility. In her view, different leadership styles and strengths are a positive feature in the workplace, enabling both women and men to contribute complementary leadership skill sets.

The third perspective is based on the social constructionist premise that repertoires, discourses and communities are gendered rather than people (Crawford 1995). Holmes (2006) argues that leaders, irrespective of their gender, are in principle able to range across a linguistic repertoire of talk stereotypically coded ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. According to Holmes (ibid), the language of leaders is primarily shaped by whether they work in a masculine or feminine CofP. Thus, a male leader working in a CofP deemed to be feminine (such as, conventionally speaking, a Human Resources department) is much more likely to use relational leadership language than a male leader working in a masculine CofP (such as a Sales department). However in these findings that leaders do not utilize gendered styles is

the implicit logic that CofPs are structured (or can be conceptualized as structured) along a cline of binary gender differences.

More recently, gender, language and leadership research is contesting the presumption that there are binary gender differences within leadership discursive practices and contexts. Mullany (2007) argues that the pervasive interplay of corporate (gendered) discourses, are at least as powerful as CofPs in shaping linguistic practices in the workplace. Author (2003) has proposed that senior people have multiple and competing identities that are only partially defined by gender, and that leaders move between a variety of discursively constructed identities as they speak and interact with colleagues. Women managers often shift between a variety of 'subject positions' as they speak and interact with colleagues, some of which are relatively 'powerful' and others relatively 'powerless' (Author, 2003: 32). Within this reframed perspective, gender is viewed as just one of many factors that may shape the ongoing construction of leadership identities. However, within the socio-cultural context of senior women's minority position (Vinnicombe and Sealy, 2013), a leader's gender may at times emerge as a highly salient factor in terms of its discursive effects upon their quest to achieve their business and professional goals effectively.

Methodology

This case study was part of a larger research project involving 18 UK part-time MBA student volunteers, most of whom were middle-ranking managers in their day jobs. The managers were asked to take part in a series of video-recorded, competitive leadership tasks which required them to speak and interact in order to plan creatively, solve problems, make decisions and produce a 'winning' outcome. The larger research project involved a comparison of three, differently gendered teams of six: a men-only team, a women-only team and a mixed gender team. My objective here is to focus solely on how women managers 'do leadership' step by step, during the course of a competitive, leadership task.

Arguably this study was limited by the condition that it did not take place within a 'real' business context. However, there are very few corporate contexts 'in real life' where

there are women-only leadership teams, or even teams of equal gender composition. The context is also (uniquely) well placed to show how leadership freshly emerges in a team where people do not usually work together. I would suggest however that the activity closely simulated business conditions in the sense that the participants were real business managers undertaking a competitive task that required an authentic team discussion and a genuine solution to enable a team to win. Typically, MBA students are used to working together in teams and also familiar with simulated leadership team activities. To this extent, the activity was naturally-occurring within the higher education knowledge frame (Goffman 1974) that enables students to learn their subject and gain a university postgraduate degree in management studies.

The leadership task required each team to build a paper tower which conformed to a number of technical criteria including height, the strength to support a glass tumbler, and 'aesthetic appeal' within a short time limit. The three teams had to compete to build the tallest, most attractive tower able to support a glass in 30 minutes planning time and 15 minutes building time. In order to do this, teams were supplied with a standard set of equipment and were asked to work around a small block of tables. While height and strength are clearly measurable, aesthetic appeal is of course a subjective judgment. In order to simulate competitive business conditions, a judge (a Professor of Management at the universityⁱ) was assigned to select the 'best' tower according to the criteria and his professional view.

As the researcher, I was present as a participant-observer throughout the activity. I was a participant in so far as I presented the rules to each team at the start of the activity, and acted as time keeper. As observer, I watched each team in sequence by sitting discreetly in a corner away from the action. The linguistic interactions of each team were later transcribed using Conversation Analysis (CA) transcription conventions (Jefferson 2004)ⁱⁱ. In this activity, there was no requirement in the rules for any individual to take on the role of leader or any other appointed role. Indeed there was no specification at all about how the team should speak and interact in order to reach an outcome. Yet by virtue of both its

team and competitive imperatives, the task was likely to produce leadership talk and linguistic practices according to my definitions on p.00 above, and also to reveal the gradual emergence of leadership where no single person is externally appointed to this status.

In order to analyse this 'doing' of leadership – that is, what an emerging leader 'looks and sounds like' within a woman-only team, I combine my discursive perspective with an 'interactional sociolinguistics' (Schiffrin 1994) approach to data analysis. My choice of an IS approach is based on its widespread use by scholars deploying a discursive perspective within the field of feminist linguistics research (e.g. Angouri, 2011; Holmes 2006; Mullany 2007). Overall, the aim of IS is to produce an inductive, micro-analysis of short, sequential extracts of spoken discourse (Schiffrin 1994). As we shall see below, IS takes a chronological, turn by turn, descriptive approach to the team discussion in order to capture the richness of individual utterances at the level of word, clause, phrase, prosodic or non-verbal cue. IS focuses upon the specific linguistic 'contextualisation cues' or 'discourse strategies' available to speakers in terms of what effect a word, phrase, expression or gesture seeks to achieve on other speakers (Cameron 2001). From this micro-linguistic evidence, IS can then infer larger stylistic, discursive and cultural patterns in terms of leadership practices and relationships (in line with definitions of leadership on p.00 above).

In terms of identifying and assessing which participants who 'have a voice' and/or emerge in a leadership role in this context, the study takes a 'bottom up' approach that enables definitions of leadership to emerge from the analysis of the data. However, such an emergent analysis will inevitably take account of previous research that has identified linguistic strategies deemed routinely indexical of leadership talk such as directives, opening and closing a sequence of talk, suggesting a course of action, summarizing, decision-making, expressing opinions, cautioning, confronting colleagues, and so on (e.g. Holmes and Stubbe 2004; Svennevig, 2012).

In terms of how gender may be indexed in the data, this paper draws on the work of Ochs (1992) who posits that linguistic features may index social meanings which in turn help to constitute gender meanings. Ochs (ibid) argues that very few linguistic features directly

index gender (such as terms of address or titles), but that there are linguistic features that index, for example, gendered interactional styles, practices and discourses. I shall use this evidence as a basis for developing a 'critical', feminist-linguistic reading of the data (Wodak, 1997), as I shall demonstrate below.

Discourse Analysis

The analysis examines four extracts from the **video-recorded**, task sequence. The first is the opening sequence from the moment after the timekeeper asks the participants to begin the task. The value of analyzing the opening sequence is that this should show which linguistic strategies index emerging leadership practices. They should reveal how leadership is negotiated by this team of women from the very start of the task: for example, whether a single individual emerges as a leader of their team, or whether leadership is to be collectively shared or competed for. The second and third extracts are at two mid-points during the action. Mid-point analyses should reveal whether the linguistic indices of emerging leadership identified in the first set of extracts have been affirmed or contested by the participants once they are in 'the thick of the action'. From the linguistic indices, we might examine what range of leadership practices are displayed; whether any single individual establishes themselves as leader; whether alternatively, leadership has been distributed among the members of the group; or whether there are signs of competition and contestation for leadership. Finally, the fourth extract is towards the end of the task when the team of six women is under pressure to complete the building of the paper tower. An end-point analysis should reveal whether any linguistic indices of leadership that emerged in the earlier extracts have been maintained, renegotiated, contested or overturned.

Extract 1: *'if you've got a better idea I'm happy to hear it...'*

(Participants: Georgina; Haleema; Julie; Katarina; Lucy; Monaⁱⁱⁱ)

- | | | |
|---|----|--|
| 1 | Ge | right has [anyone done this task before? (<i>leans into</i> |
| 2 | | <i>centre of table</i>) |
| 3 | Ha | [I've got an idea I've got an idea |

4 Ge what we can do is (.) if you've got a better idea I'm
 5 happy obviously to hear it I've got an idea (*starts to*
 6 *roll paper*) if we do it that way and then staple it here
 7 here and in the middle and build quite a few of them like
 8 this and then and then either tie them together or er
 9 (*looking at Haleema*)
 10 Ha selotape
 11 Ge selotape it and on top of that (.) you put one of these
 12 and on top of that you put more of these (.) like (.)
 13 just literally (*looking at Haleema*)
 14 Ha yeah
 15 Ge just literally (...) like this
 16 Ha yeah
 17 Ge and then again you either tie it or you um:: (1) selotape
 18 it together and then again [you
 19 Ha [how many bases are you
 20 thinking just
 21 Ge oh as many as [(*indecipherable*)
 22 Ha [I think (.) the more stable the bottom=
 23 Ge = yeah (*gesture towards Haleema*) and then the more stable
 24 it will be absolutely
 25 Ha yeah

In this opening sequence, Georgina uses the discourse marker 'right' followed by a question which invites her colleagues to participate in the task. Simultaneously, she stretches her whole body across the block of tables, which invades other people's space, possibly indexing a desire to take a leading role in the group. But almost as soon as Georgina speaks, Haleema anticipates her question by overlapping with the response ('I've got an idea (.) I've got an idea'). Rather than reacting to this, Georgina appears to ignore her and instead offers her own idea. It would seem that her earlier move to elicit responses from her peers was actually serving a separate function as a 'ground clearing' strategy by which to position her own design proposal. In line 4, Georgina initiates her own proposal ('what you can do...'), which she rapidly qualifies ('if you've got a better idea I'm happy obviously to hear it') but without a pause for a response, offers her own idea. Her use of pronouns already indicates that she sees herself as the leader in that she clausally separates her team who will have to persuade her ('if you've got a better idea...') from herself as the person who will judge the ideas and make the decisions ('I will be happy to hear it').

In both lines 9 and 13, Georgina looks pointedly at Haleema as she starts to draw her design as if to seek support for both her idea and her assumed leadership. Haleema 'takes

up the cue' by using collaborative talk – supplying the word 'selotape' to fill the gap in Georgina's extended explanation of her idea. From lines 11 to 18, Georgina continues to develop the explanation of her design with occasional brief responses from Haleema ('yeah yeah') who appears to have adopted the role of supporter and side-kick. By line 19, there is evidence of a jointly constructed thinking process between Georgina and Haleema indexed by the use of latching, simultaneous talk and prompt questions ('how many bases are you thinking?'). Evidence that this might be a consensual exchange is indicated by the agreement noises at the end of the exchange in lines 23 and 25.

The turn-taking between the two leading speakers in the team involves a number of interruptions, overlaps and co-constructed turn-taking (e.g. lines 3, 19, 22). This could mean that the two women are creatively co-constructing ideas as I propose above, but it could also mean that Haleema is determined to challenge the silencing of her own idea in line 3, which she did not get the chance to express. Throughout this sequence, the four other participants do not 'get a single word in'. The linguistic space is wholly dominated by these two speakers.

Extract 2: 'does everyone follow that yeah?'

26 Ju yeah but that's just how you build it up so you do like
 27 [base (.) triangle (.) base [...]
 28 Ge [let's let's just redraw
 29 (moves over to where Julie is standing and tries to take
 30 over her control of the paper) so we can see exactly what
 31 we are doing (.) I was thinking if we look at it hfff
 32 Ju (huffs when her paper and pen are taken away from her)
 33 Ge like this (.) I was thinking (.) I am really bad at
 34 drawing but you know like this and then however many of
 35 them and then you would have (3)
 36 Ha yeah (.) that could work but we're saying if we run one
 37 across the bottom it gives it a strength and not
 38 collapsing=
 39 Ge =but where round the bottom? that's what I'm trying to do
 40 here (Katarina, Lucy and Mona remain silent on the side
 41 lines)
 42 Ha so (.) let me show you like (both are stretched across
 43 the table effectively excluding everyone else) a bird's
 44 eye view so we're almost going to do something like this
 45 right? with our four bases which then equates to a
 46 pyramid right? Because these are now new rolls as well
 47 Ge ah now:: I understand (.) does everyone follow that (.)
 48 yeah?

In this second extract, which occurs about ten minutes into the planning activity, Julie has just contested Georgina's original idea and proposed the idea of a pyramid shape, which has been supported by Haleema. In line 25, Julie indexes her resistance to Georgina with the phrase 'yeah but' to signal a change of rhetorical direction, and then develops her idea with an illustration of how a pyramid would look ('...base (.) triangle (.) base'). In line 27, Georgina interrupts Julie by using a collective command ('let's let's just redraw..') followed by assertive body language ('*moves over to where Julie is standing and tries to take control of the paper*'), which signifies that she is resisting Julie's attempt to contest her proposal and thereby, her emerging leadership. While Georgina hasn't argued against Julie's new idea (given that Haleema has now switched her support to Julie), she is still positioning herself as the person in charge of the planning process. That a power struggle is emerging between Julie and Georgina is evidenced by the former's non-verbal reaction to the latter ('*looking annoyed that her paper and pen have been taken away from her*'). By line 33, it is obvious that Georgina is not only trying to regain control of the planning process, but also to retain creative leadership ('like this (.) I was thinking...'). Possibly aware that she appears too forceful, Georgina mitigates her previous assertions by a self-deprecating comment ('I am really bad at drawing'). In line 36, Haleema makes clear to Georgina that she has switched her allegiance to Julie's proposal in her use of the diplomatic phrase 'yeah that could work but we're saying...', followed by a point in favour of Julie and her combined argument.

In line 39, Georgina goes on the verbal attack. She now seems aware that she has lost the support of key members of the group as she asks the direct question 'but where round the bottom?' to challenge Julie's design. As Georgina goes on to re-assert her own point ('that's what I am trying to do here'), there is silence around the table –nobody leaps to her support. This struggle between Haleema and Georgina is indexed by their body language at this point: both speakers stretch themselves across the table to gain territorial advantage. As a sign of her perceived advantage, Haleema becomes almost teacher-like:

she uses the softening command 'let me show you..' and a number of qualifying devices to encourage 'buy-in' from her colleagues such as her repeated use of the tag question 'right?'. At the end of this sequence in line 48, Georgina indicates that although she may have acquiesced to Haleema and Julie's creative argument, she is still in charge of the planning process, with her use of her instructional question 'does everyone follow that (.) yeah?'

Extract 3: 'if you had listened carefully...'

49 Ge so guys how do you [how do you
50 Ju [well spent
51 Kat [you're just going to accept one=
52 Ju =it's going to take you more than five seconds to try and
53 attach it=
54 Ge =[yeah
55 Kat [if you got the results it's simple (*continues to*
56 selotape [that's done
57 Ge [yeah you should put (.) shall we no [shall we
58 Mon [but why
59 don't we make[...
60 Ha [we're not allowed to hang or tape or or
61 Ge no we're allowed to do it from the floor there was
62 nothing to to to talk about the floor just the walls and
63 the ceiling if you had only listened carefully (.) um:::
64 Ju =so we can tape to the floor
65 Ge [no I was thinking we could (...)
66 Ju [so we could measure the floor then
67 Voices (*all talking at once and almost indecipherable*)
68 Ge I don't think it's going to stick to (.) it will stick to
69 [this::
70 Ju yes [but it's not going to
71 Lu but [I was thinking of a few sheets of paper

At this mid-point the women's team is deeply involved in planning their design. As we saw above, Georgina's design was contested by Julie and then later, by Lucy, who had each offered different designs. Despite the fact that Georgina resisted these alternative designs, no clear alternative design has emerged.

At this point, Georgina is still stretched across the table in a physically dominant position but Katarina has also assumed a central position by taking control of the model building with other members grouped around her trying to help. In line 50, Georgina attempts to make a 'chairing' move by asking about the design that Katarina is modeling. However, no

attempt is made by her colleagues to respect her conversational turns (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974), as Georgina is 'overlapped' mid-question by both Julie and Katarina. The conversational focus, if there is one, seems to be between Julie and Katarina who are working on the model, with Georgina making prompting comments. In line 53, Julie offers Katarina advice, to which Georgina agrees, but she is overlapped by Katarina who brushes off that advice ('if you got the results it's simple').

In line 58, Georgina once again attempts to prompt the activity by offering advice, making three false starts ('[yeah you should put (.) shall we no [shall we]', to which no-one obviously responds. This indicates that she may have lost the leadership position she established quite quickly in the first extract. Instead, Mona makes a suggestion which is heard by Haleema but not picked up by the recording, and to which Haleema responds dismissively in line 61, which is then echoed by Georgina. She then refers to the rules of the task '(no we're not allowed to do it from the floor...)' perhaps as a platform to re-establish her authority. She follows this up with an admonishing, qualifying statement to Haleema: 'if you had listened carefully (.) um::'. The fact that Georgina feels she can 'tick off' Haleema indexes a return of her authority, which is possibly inappropriate within the more collaborative conversation established by the rest of the team. Certainly, this show of authority is ignored by the rest of the group. While in line 65, Julie attempts to build on Georgina's advice ('so we can tape to the floor?'), she then ignores Georgina's response by talking over it (lines 67-71) and moving on to a new idea.

In this extract, Georgina is speaking to maintain her authority as leader despite the obvious lack of support from her colleagues. Overall, the interaction here is free-for-all, frenetic, yet collaborative and potentially creative, indicating a much more egalitarian distribution of leadership linguistic practices than in the first and second extracts. Everyone has a voice in the discussion by this point.

Extract 4: 'that's the magic'

72 Lu I like where you are going with this but what I think you
 73 should do (.) is have one standing up there (*points to*
 74 *parts of tower*)
 75 Ju yep yep
 76 Lu one standing up there
 77 Ju yep yep
 78 Lu and do as I said that matchstick thing and do another one
 79 standing up
 80 Ju do you want to come and build?
 81 Lu yeah I guess I could do that (.) I'm pretty rubbish at
 82 rolling
 83 Ju I'll roll and you can build (*gets up and moves away*)
 84 Ge can you hold this here for a moment (*looking at Katarina*)
 85 so I can
 86 Kat so what is (.) so what is it now? (*looking at Lucy*)
 87 Lu um it will be the green one otherwise it isn't going to
 88 look um very (.) attractive (.) unless we have one there
 89 and have two like a blue one either side and then we'll
 90 go red on top of that
 91 Ge it's so random
 92 Lu it's all right (.) it's going to look good eventually (3)
 93 Ge (*looking at Lucy*) wh-what's going to happen at the next
 94 level? (.) how are you going to do the next level?
 95 Lu that's the magic
 96 Ge oh is that right? (*Ge and Lucy both laugh*)
 97 Lu we'll find a way (.) okay (.) so (.) next maybe there's a
 98 better idea if we stick them to this bit here?
 99 Ge okay

This extract occurs almost at the end of the 15-minute building phase. As no design was agreed by the team at the end of the planning phase, it is now apparent that the six team members have no clear plan for building their paper tower. There is a physical divide between the three members who are doing the 'grunt work' of making paper cylinders – the building blocks from which the tower is being constructed – and the other three members (Georgina, Katarina and Julie) who are kneeling on the floor making the tower. At the start of this extract, Lucy, who was notably quiet during the planning phase, steps in.

In line 73, Lucy makes a complimentary remark about the messy, paper construction on the floor ('I like where you are going with this'). However, it is clear that this is a 'negative politeness strategy' (Brown and Levinson 1987) – a means of softening an implied criticism to save Julie's 'face' – before she suggests the alternative approach she had proposed earlier. Julie appears to respond in ll. 76 – 78 quite dismissively ('yep yep'), but Lucy persists

with her point. In line 81, Julie appears to give way by getting up from the floor and allowing Lucy to take her place. By getting up and moving away from the floor, Julie does not appear to give up her place resentfully; possibly she has recognized that she is failing to make any progress. In line 82, Lucy again uses a negative politeness strategy to smooth what might have been a difficult moment by making a self-deprecating comment ('I'm pretty rubbish at rolling'). We can see that her comment achieves this objective by Julie's response ('I'll roll and you build'). Meanwhile, Georgina is issuing instructions to Katarina. However, rather than responding to Georgina, Katarina turns to Lucy for advice ('so what is it now?'). In her extended response (ll. 88 – 91), Lucy has effortlessly stepped into the leadership role: she supplies the answer, with reasons, and gives an indirect, collective command ('we'll go red on top of that'). In line 91, Georgina appears to show her irritation at Lucy's rapid appropriation of the leadership role by her dismissive comment 'it's so random', but this fails to faze Lucy. Instead, she makes a reassuring comment about the building process ('it's all right↑ (.) it's going to look good eventually'). However, Georgina does not give up without a fight, asking two testing questions in sequence in lines 94 – 5. Rather than answering either factually or defensively, Lucy gives a disarming response 'that's the magic', which causes them both to laugh. She continues to make further reassuring comments in lines 98 – 9, and succeeds in neutralizing Georgina's opposition. By line 100, Georgina has accepted Lucy's take-over, and from that point to the completion of the task, Lucy assumes the leadership of the team.

Discussion

The use of Interactional Sociolinguistic (IS) analysis has provided us with a series of 'snapshots' of the discursive constitution of leadership within this women-only team. Such an analysis can produce detailed, situated assessments of how leadership emerges and develops, and in this case, of how women 'do' leadership to engage in a competitive team task.

In my view, the patterns of spoken interaction across the four extracts support the social constructionist/discursive perspective that these women managers perform multiple and at times competing identities. In the first extract, Georgina and Haleema used a range of 'transactional' linguistic strategies (such as assertions, commands and direct questions) to determine whose idea was likely to win more acceptance, and their two-handed discussion rather insensitively excluded their colleagues. The use of transactional speech strategies index Georgina's attempt to position herself as leader of the team. Those strategies also indexed a hierarchical rather than an egalitarian team structure, with two dominant speakers competing to be heard before four unresponsive listeners. In the second extract, the use of transactional speech strategies continued with Georgina attempting to position herself as leader of the team but without apparent success.

However in the third extract, there was a shift in the linguistic dynamics, indexing that speakers can draw upon a range of linguistic strategies that are deemed to be both transactional and relational (Vinnicombe and Singh 2002; Schnurr 2009). In this extract, the interaction was characterized by overlapping voices, simultaneous talk and co-constructed turn-taking, which indexes rather more egalitarian relationships. Georgina was no longer the dominant voice, and previously silent members of the team were pitching in. Indeed so cacophonous was the discussion that no single speaker was being listened to. It was thus unsurprising that the team failed to agree on, or to achieve a successful design until Lucy took over at the end. In this second extract the speakers were utilising 'a collaborative floor', which Edelsky (1981: 383) argues is more typical of the interactional style of women (marked by an 'F2' floor of informal, overlapping, free-for-all talk). In Edelsky's mixed gender study (ibid), the women were considered to have produced highly creative and productive talk; in our all-female study however, the creativity of the interaction was far less evident, especially as the task outcome was deemed unsuccessful by the judge.

In contrast, the final extract shows how the team reverted to more hierarchical linguistic relationships, in which the contestation of 'who should be the leader' was eventually resolved. In the final few minutes of the task, we saw how Lucy, who had been

the quietest member of the team until that point, 'saved the day' by means of a series of skillful linguistic strategies. She combined politeness, praise, humour and authority (Author 2010; Holmes and Stubbe, 2003) in order to assert her leadership over this disorganized team.

The lack of any obvious gender patterning in language use appears to contest the notion of a binary gendered leadership language. The analysis demonstrates that women managers move between a variety of different identities or 'subject positions' as they speak and interact with colleagues, some more 'powerful' (such as leader, generator of ideas), and others less powerful (such as follower, builder or listener). This is seen in the analysis in terms of the varying extent to which each team member 'has a voice' (literally and metaphorically) in order to maintain working relationships and persuade people to get business done.

But while the discourse analysis reveals complexity and diversity in the subject positions taken up by these women, there is arguably some evidence of self-initiated, gendered practices that may be discriminatory to women themselves in the longer term. During this task, a number of team members – Georgina, Haleema, Julie and (less evidently in these extracts), Katarina – competed to be heard. They wanted to claim a leadership voice or at least share the potential for engaging equally in leadership practices. As we saw, there was considerable contestation of the available linguistic space (Jule, 2004). No team member emerged in a predominant leadership role because every member of the team competed with each other and challenged each other to be heard. While there may have been potential for a shared distribution of leadership, and creativity in the wealth of diverse voices, viewpoints and ideas (Edelsky 1981), no single voice was listened to or given precedence, and thus no single design idea was accepted until right at the end of the task.

The team's rather chaotic, 'jamming' session does support previous research which posits that all-female teams construct a distinctive conversational space that may not always benefit them (e.g. Author, 2006; Coates, 1995; Edelsky, 1981). In all four extracts, the analysis shows that Georgina made a strong attempt to lead and direct the team, but her

efforts were contested by Haleema, Julie, Katarina and Lucy at different points in the task process. Haleema sided with Julie against Georgina in the second extract; Julie, Katarina and Haleema all resisted Georgina's attempts to control the task in the third extract; and finally, Lucy decisively stepped in to take over the task from Georgina in the fourth and final extract. Linguistically, this contestation is indexed by a clash between the team's competitive interaction and its determinedly egalitarian team ethic. Arguably, the teams' refusal to accept one amongst their number as the overall team leader may have led to their failure to achieve a successful design. Of course, the team's ultimate failure to work successfully together may not just have been a matter of gender but a combination of factors such as the simulated nature of the task, the mix of personalities, professional backgrounds, status, and so on. What we can say with some assurance is that this women-only team produced a distinctive linguistic dynamic, by which they did not readily wish to accept their female peers in leadership roles. One classic explanation is that, because women have become acculturated to perform femininity as an egalitarian rather than a hierarchical practice (e.g. Coates, 1995; Edelsky 1981; Maltz and Borker, 1982), accepting one woman amongst others as 'the leader' challenges normative gendered practices.

While distributed and collective leadership is increasingly favoured by organizations (Kets de Fries et. al., 2010), there are numerous occasions when people are required to perform leadership within the compass of a single, authoritative role. If the outcome of this case study is in any way indicative of broader workplace practices, women are not always prepared to support and follow female colleagues who wish to take up distinct leadership positions. Yet it is surely a vital act of solidarity for women to accept and support each other as potential figures of authority in order that they can more readily progress to more senior positions. Such solidarity would offer women a proactive strategy, in my view, to contest corporate gendered discourses that continue to position women in ways that discourage them from assuming senior leadership roles (Eagly and Carli 2007; Mullany, 2009).

Conclusion

This study has shown how the use of a discursive perspective can demonstrate precisely how leadership identities emerge and are constructed moment by moment within an all-women team. The analysis of discourse demonstrates how the elusive organisational phenomenon of (gendered) leadership can quite literally, be ‘talked into being’. By focusing primarily on women’s interactional practices and by avoiding explicit comparisons with male leadership, this study makes more visible the multiple, competing and non-stereotypical ways in which women’s leadership identities emerge and are enacted. Within a context of interest to feminist linguistics, the study also highlights some of the possible strengths and limitations of the ways in which women in an all-female team speak and interact to achieve leadership, which may provide valuable insights for scholars and practitioners who are investigating women’s lack of progress to senior positions in the business world.

7,320 words approx

ⁱ The task is used regularly by consultants of leadership and management who know the ‘right’ answer from a design perspective. Therefore it was more appropriate to ask a Professor of Management than of Design to judge the task.

ⁱⁱ Conversation Analysis (CA) transcription conventions (Jefferson 2004):

- (.) micro-pause
- (1) pause of specified number of seconds
- [overlapping speech or interruption
- (laughs) non-verbal features
- emphasis
- :: drawn out speech
- ↑ rising intonation
- (...) indistinct speech

ⁱⁱⁱ All participants’ names are pseudonyms.

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