

# Gender, politeness and institutional power roles: Humour as a tactic to gain compliance in workplace business meetings

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## *Abstract*

*This paper examines the complex relationship between gender, politeness and institutional power roles by focusing on how meeting chairs utilise the linguistic practice of humour in their attempts to gain the compliance of subordinates in managerial business meetings. Following recent work in language and gender studies, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness model is rejected in favour of a communities of practice approach to conceptualising notions of linguistic politeness (Mills 2002). Data are analysed from six managerial business meetings taken from two ethnographic case studies of businesses based in the UK. Following Holmes (2000: 175), the notion of 'repressive humour' as a strategy of linguistic politeness is adopted, whereby those who are enacting power disguise the oppressive intent of their message by minimising the status differences between themselves and their subordinates, a strategy that has resulted from the 'conversationalisation' of public discourse (Fairclough 1992).*

*There is clear evidence of the female chairs using the tactic of repressive humour as a mitigation strategy to attempt to gain the compliance of their subordinates, and this disproves the dominant stereotype that women lack a sense of humour in workplace interaction (cf. Holmes et al. 2001). However, there is no evidence of the male chairs adopting this strategy. Whilst this finding indicates evidence of gender patterning, this is not to suggest that the female chairs are being more linguistically polite than their male counterparts, as would be predicted by previous language and gender studies (Holmes 1995). In all of their attempts to gain compliance, whilst male chairs do not use repressive humour, they do use a variety of mitigation strategies to ensure that their attempts to gain compliance are not issued in a bald, unmitigated manner. The study demonstrates the need for more small-scale, context-specific investigations of gender, politeness and power to take place, as well as highlighting that the under-researched practice of humour provides a fruitful line of investigation.*

## 1. Introduction

Drawing on recent work in feminist linguistics (Mills 2002), this article attempts to move away from the persistence of Brown and Levinson's ([1978], 1987) model of politeness universals in language and gender studies (Brown 1980; Holmes 1995) and instead produce a more context-sensitive, dynamic approach to analysing the complex relationship between gender, politeness and power. With the exception of recent work by Holmes (2000) and Holmes and Stubbe (2003), there is a paucity of studies focusing specifically on gender and politeness in the context of the workplace. This study investigates female and male chairs' use of humour as a linguistic politeness device when attempting to gain compliance from their subordinates in the specific context of workplace business meetings. Whilst there is a dominant stereotype that females lack a sense of humour, there have been few empirical investigations on language, gender and humour (Crawford 1995). Holmes *et al.* (2001) found evidence of females frequently using humour in New Zealand workplaces, thus disproving the dominant stereotype. This study will assess whether this stereotype is also an unsubstantiated one in UK workplaces.

When theorising notions of politeness and humour, Holmes (2000) and Holmes and Stubbe (2003) are critical of certain aspects of Brown and Levinson's model. However, it still forms the primary basis of their approach to linguistic politeness. In contrast, this study follows a communities of practice approach (Lave and Wenger 1991) to theorising politeness. The notion of a community of practice (CofP) has become heavily influential in language and gender studies in recent years, following the pioneering work of Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992a, 1992b). Mills (2002: 69) argues that the CofP framework enables a 'more flexible and complex model' of politeness to be conceived, and by adopting a CofP approach to politeness, this study contests the traditional, oft-cited finding that women are more linguistically polite than their male counterparts (Holmes 1995).

Mumby (1988: 68) points out that meetings are 'the most important and visible sites of organizational power', and Boden (1994: 81) argues that meetings enable analysts to witness 'the very social action through which institutions produce and reproduce themselves'. Meetings thus appear to be an ideal arena within which to examine how power is enacted in workplace interaction. The empirical evidence analysed in this study is taken from managerial business meetings recorded as part of two broader ethnographic case studies of businesses based in the same UK city. One business is a manufacturing firm, whereas the other is a retail company. The contrast in the different sectors to which the companies

belong provides an interesting point of comparison. The manufacturing sector is traditionally perceived to be male-dominated, whereas retail is seen as female-dominated (Parker and Fagenson 1994). Comparing the two companies will enable an assessment of whether there are any observable differences in the data sample between the two distinct but comparable organisations in terms of participants' gender and how humour is used as a tactic to gain compliance.

## **2. From 'universals' to a 'local' approach: Conceptualisations of politeness**

The dominance of Brown and Levinson's ([1978], 1987) model of politeness universals, still observable twenty-six years after its initial publication, renders it worthy of consideration. The influence of their framework can be witnessed even in attempts at considerably revising their theory, including Mills' (2002) work. As Harris (2001:452) points out, their theory 'has acquired canonical status and exerted immense influence'. Brown and Levinson's model is based on Goffman's (1967) notion of *face*, the public self image of all rational adult members when engaging in interaction. They split Goffman's concept into *negative face*, the desire to be unimpeded, and *positive face*, the desire to be liked/admired. If a demand or intrusion needs to be made on another person's autonomy, then this is distinguished as a potential *face-threatening act* (FTA). When posed with the task of performing an FTA, Brown and Levinson postulate that a speaker has a number of options, which include redressing the FTA by employing strategies of *positive politeness* (attention to the hearer's positive face by demonstrating that her/his wants or needs are desirable) or by employing strategies of *negative politeness* (attention to the hearer's negative face by redressing impositions). Brown and Levinson list numerous strategies that can be used to perform such polite acts, thus presenting researchers with an abundance of systematic terminological distinctions. However, there are problems with the theoretical underpinnings of their model and also within the framework itself, which has led to criticisms on numerous counts.

Austin (1990) and Thomas (1995) have both pointed out that there are occasions when speakers will perform utterances that are designed to be offensive. As Brown and Levinson base their theory on the avoidance of FTAs, it is therefore unable to account for occasions where the overriding speaker intention is to be uncooperative. Similarly, Eelen (2001) makes the point that Brown and Levinson's concentration on strategies of FTA avoidance results in linguistic impoliteness being overlooked. He argues that 'any theory that pretends to say something valuable about one side automatically needs to deal with the other side as

well' (Eelen 2001: 92). In order to account for this problem with Brown and Levinson's theory, Austin (1990: 279) defines the concept of a face attack act (FAA), defined as 'communicative acts that are injurious to the hearer's positive or negative face and are introduced in a situation that could have been avoided, but where their inclusion is perceived by the hearer to be intentional'.

Analysts including Thomas (1995), Spiers (1998) and Harris (2001) have questioned the absolute, dualistic categories of positive and negative politeness. Spiers (1998) argues that Brown and Levinson's positive/negative distinction is too rigid, and is thus unable to account for the multifunctionality of linguistic strategies. In an analysis of political discourse, Harris (2001: 463) illustrates positive and negative politeness strategies co-occurring within the same stretch of talk, leading her to argue that there are 'undoubtedly many other discourse contexts' where this is also the case. Both Harris (2001) and Mills (2002) critique Brown and Levinson for viewing politeness as occurring only within single utterances. Mills (2002: 70) instead argues that politeness should be conceived 'as something which emerges at a discourse level'. Brown and Levinson have also been heavily criticised from a cross-cultural perspective (see, for example, Gu 1990 and Flowerdew 1999).

Bucholtz (1999) argues that the CofP approach has had a revolutionary effect on feminist linguistics by providing it with a workable social theory, and Meyerhoff (2002: 539) points out that since the early 1990s, researchers have 'wholeheartedly' adopted the framework. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992a, 1992b) argue that language and gender have been abstracted from the social practices in which they are produced, thus blurring the complex manner in which they relate to one another. They assert that researchers need to connect each abstraction 'to a wide spectrum of social and linguistic practice' (1992a: 88). Instead of producing studies which over-generalise, categorising female and male speech patterns into two distinct, homogeneous categories, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet advocate that analysts stop perceiving difference between women's and men's speech to be the starting point of research. Instead, they urge researchers to 'look locally' (1992b: 461), by following the CofP approach, which they define as (1992b: 464):

An aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations – in short – practices – emerge in the course of this mutual endeavor.

Eckert (2000: 35) argues that the immense value of the CofP as a theoretical construct rests on 'the focus it affords on the mutually constitu-

tive nature of the individual, group, activity and meaning'. CofPs can develop out of formal or informal enterprises, and members can be either *core* or *peripheral* depending on their level of integration. CofPs can survive changes in membership, they can be small or large, and they can come into existence and go out of existence.

Mills (2002) highlights the crucial role that the concept of the CofP can play in modifying notions of linguistic politeness, and I wish to follow her perspective. She argues that feminist linguists need to take a 'community-based perspective on gender and linguistic performance', resulting in 'a sense of politeness as having different functions and meanings for different groups of people' (2002: 71). From a CofP perspective, linguistic politeness is defined as follows:

Politeness should be seen as a set of strategies or verbal habits which someone sets as a norm for themselves or which others judge as the norm for them, as well as being a socially constructed norm within particular communities of practice. (2002: 77)

Mills (*ibid.*) argues that studies which rely on Brown and Levinson's framework produce analyses that are both 'abstract' and 'disembodied'. In contrast, the CofP approach provides a context-specific definition of politeness norms and conventions which are dynamic and can change depending upon which CofP participants are interacting within. A discourse-based approach to politeness is viable through a CofP framework, and the CofP approach also enables notions of linguistic impoliteness to be conceived. In contrast to the rigidity of Brown and Levinson's model, participants within particular CofPs decide what is either polite or impolite behaviour against the expectations they have in the specific communities within which their discourse takes place. The CofP view of linguistic politeness as used in this study incorporates Goffman's (1967) concept of face, and Brown and Levinson's FTA category is retained. However, in light of the above critique, their view of splitting face into a positive and negative category appears to be neither useful nor valid. In addition to FTAs, Austin's FAA category, minus her reference to positive and negative face, is also included to account for situations where there is no co-operative intent from the speaker.

Along with providing a framework which enables the complexity of (im)politeness to be examined, Mills (2002: 85) points out that the CofP approach also allows the analyst to perceive that 'within different communities of practice, individuals may perform their gendered identities in different ways'. Indeed, this raises the question of how gender identity is conceptualised, and in conjunction with the CofP approach to politeness, gender will be perceived as a performative social construct, follow-

ing Butler (1990). Butler's theory of performativity has also become very popular in language and gender research, as it moves away from the dichotomous notion of women and men having distinct speech patterns. According to Butler (1990: 25), gender can be perceived as a *performative* social construct because it is 'always a doing' and there is 'no gender identity behind the expressions of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'. Therefore, Butler believes that masculinity and femininity are effects we perform by the activities in which we partake, not predetermined traits we possess.

Holmes *et al.* (1999: 353) make the crucial point that in workplace interaction any utterance can contribute to the performance of more than one aspect of speakers' identities. This could be their *institutional* identities, including managerial identities, their *social* identities including gender, or their *personal* identities, including a desire to be friendly, etc. It is integral to bear this in mind when conducting any analysis of workplace interaction, and whilst gender is perceived as an omnipresent feature in every interaction, it is important to acknowledge that it may not always be the most salient form of identity being performed (Freed 1996; Swann 2002). The compatibility of gender as a performative social construct and the CofP approach is illustrated by Bergvall (1996: 175) who argues that as 'gender identities are constructed through the everyday actions and discourse of participants within a certain social order', it has become the role of the researcher to analyse CofPs 'within which gender is constructed and enacted'.

### **3. Power, politeness and the workplace**

Holmes *et al.* (1999: 354) make the crucial point that any workplace interaction is 'seldom neutral in terms of power', and as a consequence, any examination of the construction of identity is 'inevitably concerned with the ways in which power and solidarity are enacted through discourse'. They suggest that Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, along with certain aspects of critical discourse analysis (CDA) from Pateman (1980) and Fairclough (1989, 1995) can provide a valuable perspective through which empirical analyses can be conducted.

Holmes *et al.*'s (1999) view of examining politeness in conjunction with certain elements of CDA is valuable, and the two approaches will be integrated in this study. However, whilst they describe Brown and Levinson's view of power as 'useful and widely accepted', I wish to take issue with this. Brown and Levinson (1987: 63) claim that the power relationship that exists between participants will affect the 'weightiness' of the FTA and thus affect the strategy of politeness that is used. How-

ever, as Harris (2001) points out, this is a rather rigid perspective which results in participants' power relationships being regarded as something pre-existing and taken for granted. Alternatively, Harris (2001: 452) believes that power should be viewed as 'a dynamic in performing interaction'.

Mills (2002) highlights the influential role that Foucault (1972) has played in recent feminist linguistic thinking, and whilst it is acknowledged that there are problems in his view of power concerning agency if his theory is taken to its extreme (see Mills 1997 for a critique), Foucault's conceptualisation of power is an extremely useful one which helps to move away from the rigidity of power as viewed through Brown and Levinson's model. Instead of being seen as something which only certain speakers possess, from a Foucauldian perspective, power is far more dispersed. As Mills (forthcoming???) argues, power should be viewed as a 'net' or a 'web' instead of a possession of individual speakers. Mills (2002: 74) documents that, by following Foucault, language can be seen as 'an arena whereby power may be appropriated, rather than power relations being seen as frozen societal roles that are clearly mapped out for participants before an interaction takes place'. Meeting chairs should therefore be seen as constantly having to re-enact their power every time they engage in spoken interaction. Power over their subordinates is not something which they automatically possess as a consequence of their position on the institutional hierarchy. On every occasion where they attempt to gain compliance, they need to re-enact their power by performing their superior professional role identity.

Of particular significance to this study is Fairclough's (1992) observation that changes in organisational culture have led to changes in how power is enacted through workplace language. He documents that over the last three decades, there has been a transition in workplace culture in that the more traditional form of hierarchy has increasingly been replaced with flatter structures. Fairclough argues that such transitions in organisational cultures can be seen predominantly as changes in discourse practices, with language use playing an increasingly important role in organisations. He defines the 'democratisation' of discourse, whereby markers that overtly signal asymmetry are being eliminated (1992: 203). As a result of this democratisation, employees' social identities are now being defined in terms that have been traditionally associated with the private sphere. This is manifested in the discourse practices of the workplace, where conversational practices traditionally associated with the sphere of private life 'are being systematically simulated within organisations' (1992: 8). Fairclough refers to this as the 'conversationalisation' of public discourse: the breaking down of overt power markers leads to workplace interaction taking place in a more informal, conver-

sational manner (1992: 204). This cultural transition has also been documented by Sarangi and Roberts (1999), who refer to this change in workplace practices as the *new work order* (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996). Sarangi and Roberts (1999: 9) argue that this order empowers workers by creating 'a core vision of culture'. Hierarchies are thus reduced, and as a consequence, professional identities become destabilised.

One result of the new work order and the democratisation of discourse in organisational cultures is that power asymmetries manifest themselves in a more covert or subtle manner. This can be seen in light of Fairclough's (1989, 2001) distinctions between *coercive* and *consent* power. Fairclough argues that the former refers to instances where power is exercised overtly, whilst the latter refers to how consent can be manufactured, thereby exercising power in a more covert manner. The view of coercion and consent is very similar to Pateman's (1980) belief that power can be exercised both in an *oppressive* and *repressive* manner, with oppressive corresponding with Fairclough's notion of coercion and repressive corresponding with his consent category. Recent changes in organisational culture have therefore resulted in a transition from power being exercised in a coercive or oppressive manner, to power being exercised through consent, in a repressive manner. Pateman (1980) argues that instead of oppressively emphasising hierarchical differences, those in powerful positions gain compliance by using repressive discourse strategies to gain the consent of subordinates by minimising status differences. Holmes *et al.* (1999) point out the usefulness of viewing Fairclough's consent power and Pateman's view of repressive discourse in conjunction with politeness theory, arguing that the interaction between power and politeness is illuminated by these concepts. They define repressive discourse as 'a covert and often more positive means of exercising power, in which speakers minimise the overt expression of differences in status or expertise and create solidarity in order to gain their interlocutor's compliance and goodwill' (1999: 355).

I will follow Holmes (2000) in applying the concept of repressive discourse to a consideration of humour from a linguistic politeness perspective. Holmes (2000: 165) points out that humour is a means through which repressive discourse can be realised as it is a strategy that can be 'a very effective way of doing power less explicitly ... humour can be used to achieve the speaker's instrumental goal whilst apparently de-emphasising the power differential'. A more detailed consideration of humour will now be given to illustrate how it will be defined in order to analyse how managerial chairs use humour repressively to gain compliance in meetings.

#### **4. Humour**

There are a multitude of definitions detailing what the term humour refers to, and these tend to vary quite dramatically from discipline to discipline (Linstead 1988). Kotthoff (2000) highlights the importance of laughter in distinguishing that an act of humour has taken place. Kotthoff (2000: 64) argues that laughter functions as ‘the contextualisation cue of humor par excellence’. The view of laughter as a contextualisation cue of humour is thus adopted in this study. However, despite the importance of laughter, Holmes (2000: 63) points out that whilst it is ‘an obvious (though not unambiguous) clue, it is by no means the only way in which members of an audience signal that they consider something to be humorous’. She highlights that there are a number of linguistic and contextual indicators that are also important when attempting to identify humour, including tone of voice of the speaker and listener(s) response. Holmes (2000: 163) defines humour as utterances which are ‘intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants’. She acknowledges the fundamental role that the analyst plays in distinguishing instances of humour, assessing ‘paralinguistic, prosodic and discursal clues’ to decide on whether an utterance can be classified as humorous (*ibid.*). By Holmes’ own admission, this definition is by no means comprehensive. For example, it does not account for unintentional or failed humour, and like Brown and Levinson’s theory, it also has a speaker-oriented bias. It is possible that on occasions a hearer will signal humour through the contextualisation cue of laughter, without any prompt from the speaker.

In the light of the above discussion, I will adapt Holmes’ definition of humour by expanding it to include both unintentional, unsuccessful and also hearer-activated humour. Therefore, in this study:

Humour is defined as instances where participant(s) signal amusement to one another, based on the analyst’s assessment of paralinguistic, prosodic and discursal clues. These instances can be classified as either successful or unsuccessful according to addressees’ reactions. Humour can be a result of either intentional or unintentional humorous behaviour from participants.

By extending my definition of humour to include failed humour and unintentional humour, it is hoped that the conceptual bias towards the speaker can be redressed. Examples of listener humour, including humour invoked by a listener who laughs at an utterance that the speaker has not deliberately intended to be amusing, can be included within this definition.

Crawford (1995) highlights the powerfulness of humour as a device, pointing out that this stems from the fact that it is indirect. Interactants are protected from being accused of anything they utter in the humorous mode as they can always claim that they did not intend to be serious. Holmes (2000) documents the multifunctionality of humour in the workplace. As well as a strategy that can be used to maintain solidarity and collegiality, she points out that humour can also be used as a subversive strategy by subordinates who attempt to accrue power for themselves by challenging their superiors. Another function that humour can fulfil is as repressive discourse. Holmes (2000: 175) argues that 'repressive humour' is used by superiors as 'a disguise for a less acceptable message'. Therefore, when those in positions of power are performing their identities in an attempt to gain compliance from their subordinates, they may utilise humour as a strategy to achieve this. As Holmes (*ibid.*) points out, 'it is no longer acceptable in many communities to use explicit orders when addressing professional clients', and so mitigation strategies, including hedges and also humour, 'are necessary tools for those who wish to achieve particular goals, but who do not wish to remain authoritarian in doing so'.

Drawing on Holmes' (2000) work, repressive humour in this study will be identified as instances where the less acceptable, oppressive intent of a message is disguised, enabling those who are enacting power to not appear authoritarian. Repressive humour therefore superficially minimises the status differences between those enacting power and their subordinates. The definition of repressive humour adopted in this study includes directives, where superiors attempt to gain the compliance of their subordinates to carry out specific tasks, and also criticism and insults, where the underlying intent is to attack the addressee's face with the aim of changing behaviour in order to gain compliance with the superiors' wishes. As Holmes (2000: 174) points out, humour 'functions to reduce the unacceptability' of FAAs. The data analysis will investigate repressive humour in six workplace CofPs.

## 5. The data: Meetings as CofPs

Each business meeting is defined as a CofP in its own right, with its own patterns of linguistic politeness (Mullany 2003). According to Wenger (1998: 73), the three dimensions of 'practice' that need to be fulfilled in order to make up a CofP are *mutual engagement*, a *joint negotiated enterprise* and a *shared repertoire*. These characteristics are clearly evident in business meetings, as participants mutually engage with one another in a jointly negotiated enterprise, determined by the meeting's agenda. All of the meetings that make up the database in this study are regular

events. Participants therefore develop a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over a period of time. There are numerous examples of shared repertoires in business meetings, including acronyms for the structure of departments and divisions, positions within the company and product names. Participants in meetings can have nicknames, either for each other or for others in the business. Furthermore, in some meetings there is a preferred pattern of conducting business, such as running through the agenda items in a specific manner (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999).

Data are analysed from six business meetings as CofPs, three taken from the retail company (henceforth company A) and three taken from the manufacturing company (henceforth company B), totalling 8 hours worth of business meeting data encompassing 51 managerial meeting participants, 27 female and 24 male.<sup>1</sup> Three meetings are chaired by females and three meetings by males. A summary of the meeting data is given in Table 1:

Table 1. *Summary of managerial meeting data from companies A and B*

Meeting No.	Meeting type/function	No. of participants	Gender and name of chair	Gender of participants	Length of meeting (in mins)
A1	departmental: weekly update	6	F Amy	4F; 2M	90
A2	company-wide: weekly update	11	F Amy	6F; 5M	50
A3	departmental: weekly update	4	M Steve	3M; 1F	45
B1	departmental: monthly update	11	F Carrie	6F; 5M	45
B2	committee: monthly review	10	M Rob	6M; 4F	150
B3	committee: weekly update	9	M David	6F; 3M	100

In company A, there are two female-chaired meetings (A1 and A2), and one male-chaired meeting (A3). In company B there is one female-chaired meeting (B1) and two male-chaired meetings (B2 and B3). As illustrated in Table 1, the female Chair in company A's meetings is actually the same individual, as she was the only female in the company to hold formal, pre-planned meetings. As the two meetings differ in both type and function, it was thought that examining two encounters chaired by the same female would present the opportunity to analyse her chairing style in two different contexts. An examination of gender and repressive humour in these six CofPs will now be documented.

## 6. Analysis

The analysis will commence with an examination of the three meetings from the retail company. In meeting A1, the female-chaired, departmental CofP, there are five examples of Amy using repressive humour to disguise less acceptable messages, either to mitigate a directive or to produce a criticism of her subordinates with the overall aim of gaining their compliance. The first example of Amy utilising the strategy of repressive humour, thus paying attention to her subordinates' face needs by minimising the status differences between them, at least superficially, occurs when Amy needs to gain compliance from one of her subordinates to fulfil a set task:

(1)<sup>2</sup> Amy is informing the group of the company's new newsletter.

- 1 Amy: Okay erm (.) the deadline is the twenty seventh of August  
 2 we need to write a piece for the technical department (–)  
 3 erm (–) so does anybody want to do that anybody got a  
 4 ((smile voice)) burning [(–) desire] to write  
 5 Mary: [(laughs)]  
 6 Amy: this their piece a piece for the news{xxx} this month?  
 7 Karen: Erm (.) I don't mind

Amy disguises the oppressive intent of her message through humour, using an idiomatic expression 'burning desire' combined with a smile voice (line 4). Mary signals her amusement at Amy's utterance through the contextualisation cue of laughter, and Amy immediately gains compliance from Karen (line 7). Example 1 thus demonstrates Amy using repressive humour to control her subordinates subtly, gaining their compliance without exercising her power in an oppressive manner.

The next example of Amy using repressive humour to gain compliance is again related to the task of writing for the company's newsletter:

(2) Amy has to write a manager profile about Tom.

- 1 Amy: There's a manager profile and it will be the lovely Tom (.) so  
 2 I've got to (.) get my ((smiles)) thinking cap round this  
 3 tonight and write Tom's profile  
 4 Mary: ((laughs))  
 5 Amy: So if any of you have got any dirt  
 6 ((laughter from all))  
 7 Amy: There must be a few quirky little things we can put in about  
 8 Tom (.) I'm afraid I don't know anything so (.) but if there's  
 9 anything you can give me that I can put in there [then erm ]  
 10 Karen: [mhm yeah]

In line 2 of example 2, Amy smiles and uses another idiomatic phrase, 'my thinking cap', to invoke humour and Mary again signals that she has found this amusing (line 4). Amy then uses humour once more to mitigate her directive at line 5, asking her subordinates if they have 'got any dirt' on Tom. The humour stems from the fact that Amy's register is inappropriate for the topic. She is using a conventional metaphor 'dirt', typically associated with tabloid newspapers, thus an inappropriate term to use in reference to a company newsletter. Whilst Amy initially acknowledges that the task at hand is hers, signalled by the possessive and personal pronouns 'my' and 'I' (line 2), she then attempts to get her subordinate's help, signalled by the transition to the collective pronoun 'we' (line 7), though she again acknowledges the task is her responsibility at line 9. Karen indicates her compliance with Amy at line 10. Amy is thus using repressive humour as a tactic to minimise her authority and establish a sense of solidarity between herself and her subordinates, and at the same time she gains Karen's compliance to help her complete a task.

The next example of Amy using repressive humour occurs during a preamble to issuing a directive:

- (3) Amy's status equal Mark has got his department to decorate a room.  
Amy wants her department to complete the same task.

1 Amy: Mark and I discussed that we'd do it (.) some time ago and  
2 then (.) he just got on and did it ((laughing)) so the next  
3 thing's [like oh ] thanks for telling me you were  
4 Mary: [((laughs))]  
5 Amy: going to do it on Monday you know we could got it  
6 got ours done on the same day (-) so I think we should do  
7 the same thing

Amy invokes humour here by criticising a member of the company from a different department, which can be perceived as having the effect of establishing a sense of solidarity and collegiality amongst her department, drawing a direct contrast between herself and Mark. Amy uses laughter as a contextualisation cue of humour in line 2, and yet again Mary signals her amusement (line 4). Amy completes the preamble to her directive in line 6, and then issues the directive, hedged by the pragmatic particle 'I think', inclusive pronoun 'we' and the modal 'should'. After a detailed discussion focusing on what this CofP want to decorate their room with, Amy gains compliance from both Karen and Mary. Amy thus uses repressive humour here to establish solidarity and common ground immediately before the hedged directive is issued. The activ-

ity is presented as something that the whole group, including Amy, will fulfil, whereas in fact it is only Karen and Mary who will partake in the task.

Example 4 illustrates Amy using repressive humour to mitigate a FAA, when she warns her subordinates that if they do not monitor their staff properly, they will have to face company forfeits:

(4) Amy is discussing staff behaviour.

1 Amy: I don't want to get any forfeits and erm I haven't had any  
 2 since being in technical (.) when I got them in stock I  
 3 gave them back to the managers (.) who'd let me down  
 4 so they ended up doing the forfeits ((smile voice)) so  
 5 be warned  
 6 ((laughter from all))

Amy's FAA is mitigated by repressive humour when she uses a smile voice to perform her warning. All participants signal that they have found this to be amusing at line 6.

The final example of Amy using repressive humour in meeting A1 occurs when she mitigates a criticism of Tony:

(5) Amy has just announced that the department's sales figures are down.

1 Amy: Looking at where we are a year to date then there's a few  
 2 more surprises in store really erm I came into product in  
 3 week ten so I've had  
 4 [a look at the picture from week nine to now]  
 5 Tony: [[[raises his eyebrows and starts to ((laugh)) ]  
 6 Amy: ((smile voice)) What are you laughing at?  
 7 [((laughs)) ]  
 8 Tony: [rabbits from a hat]  
 9 Amy: There's no sur[prise ]  
 10 Tony: [just wondering] [((laughs))]  
 11 Karen: [((laughs))]  
 12 Amy: Yeah we're doing really well actually  
 13 Tony: Hurray

Amy highlights that she has perceived Tony's actions to be ambiguous and she issues an FAA functioning as an accusation, mitigated by a smile voice and laughter. Amy appears to have classified Tony's ambiguous behaviour to be potentially impolite, as he may be failing to abide by the politeness norms and conventions established in this CoP, that when

the Chair is imparting information, all other participants should not attempt to communicate verbally or non-verbally.

In response, Tony utters the ambiguous phrase ‘rabbits from a hat’ (line 8). Amy takes the illocutionary force of his utterance to be a reference to her use of the term ‘surprises’ (line 2). She now appears to interpret Tony’s gestures as ones of concern that the team are not performing well enough. She reassures him that there are no actual surprises, and then positively evaluates the team’s performance by stating collectively that ‘we’re’ doing really well (line 12). By mitigating her criticism through repressive humour, she ensures that she has gained Tony’s compliance and rapidly sorts out a potential misunderstanding. Amy therefore uses repressive humour strategically here to avoid potential conflict.

In summary, there is evidence that as a strategy of linguistic politeness, repressive humour can be perceived as part of the norms and conventions of linguistic politeness within this CofP. The same can also be said for meeting A2 as a CofP, where there is another example of Amy using repressive humour. On this occasion, she uses banter to criticise James for his lack of attendance at previous meetings:

(6) James has just detailed that his department had a successful week in terms of sales.

- 1 Amy: ((smile voice)) is that why you came to [the meeting? ]  
2 James: [I’m sitting here]  
3 next to three (xxx) and business is dealt by the three  
4 thirty eight thank you very much erm =  
5 Amy: = you don’t come  
6 all these weeks when it’s down and then when it’s up  
7 he’s here  
8 ((laughter from many))  
9 James: I’ve been quite stretched (xxx) (–) erm[mm ]  
10 Amy: [I know] you have  
11 I’m only pulling your leg James

Lines 1 and 5–7 illustrate Amy using humour as a mitigating strategy to criticise the fact that James has not attended this meeting for a considerable period of time. In line 1 she issues an FAA in the form of an interrogative, accompanied by a smile voice, asking him if the only reason he came to the meeting was because his team had performed well for the first time in several weeks. By engaging in banter, Amy critiques James for his lack of attendance, and her use of humour can be seen as an attempt to gain James’ compliance in ensuring better meeting attendance in the future. She continues her critique in lines 5–7, indirectly

accusing him of attempting to avoid criticism and only attending when he knew he would receive praise. Amy's change of pronoun from 'you' in line 5 to 'he' in line 7 signals that she is attempting to place some distance between James and the rest of the group, indicating that she has moved from talking *to* James to talking *about* him, despite the fact that their spatial relationship has not changed.

Amy's accusation is found to be amusing by many of the meeting's participants, and James' response that he has been 'quite stretched' indicates that he feels that his face has been attacked. Amy then uses a conventional metaphorical expression 'I'm only pulling your leg' to reassure him that she is not being serious. It thus appears that after issuing her criticism, Amy attempts to repair any potential damage by assuring James that she is being humorous, and that he should therefore not take what she is saying seriously, providing an excellent illustration of how the power of humour can lie in its indirectness.

In the male-chaired, departmental meeting from company A (A3), there are no examples of the male Chair using humour to function in a repressive manner. Repressive humour does not therefore appear to be a strategy associated with this CofP, at least on this occasion of recording. The lack of repressive humour in this male-chaired meeting will be considered after an analysis of repressive humour in the manufacturing company's CofPs.

In the female-chaired, departmental CofP (meeting B1), there are three examples of Carrie employing the strategy of repressive humour, the first of which is illustrated in example 7:

(7) Carrie is informing the group of the time they will be allowed to leave work on Christmas Eve

1 Carrie: I'm telling you now one o'clock will be the time (.) and  
 2 that way ((smile voice)) if you go to the pub then you're  
 3 not welcome back  
 4 ((laughter from many))

Carrie invokes humour as a mitigation strategy whilst issuing her directive using a smile voice (line 2). Her use of humour regarding visits to the pub functions to disguise the oppressive intent of the message that her subordinates cannot leave before one o'clock. Many participants signal their amusement at Carrie's utterance (line 4). Carrie is thus superficially paying attention to the face needs of her subordinates by mitigating her directive in an attempt to gain their compliance.

The remaining two instances of Carrie using humour repressively occur on the same topic and in close succession, illustrated in example 8:

(8) Carrie is informing the group of the dates when the company building will be inaccessible.

- 1 Carrie: We will be closed at Christmas (.) you won't be able to get  
2 in the week between Christmas and New Year (–) so if you  
3 have to do any work you're gonna have to take it home  
4 with you  
5 ((disgruntled whispers from many))  
6 Carrie: Well I did write to everybody and only Sue Davies replied  
7 I think  
8 ((laughter from many))  
9 Phil: How long does (the) (xxxx)?  
10 Carrie: Well sometimes cos you get {xxx} New Year or something  
11 and that new deadlines are pulling erm in each direction  
12 but really if you need to do any work you are gonna have  
13 a problem cos they will not open the building at all they  
14 won't heat it or light it or anything so you need to be  
15 looking at taking your pc home for whatever one book  
16 today would involve fish and and chips for me and Simon  
17 ((laughter from many))

Carrie uses repressive humour on two occasions at lines 6–7 and 15–16 as attempts to gain her colleagues' compliance. On the first occasion, Carrie uses repressive humour to mitigate an FAA, when she criticises her subordinates for complaining after they had ignored her memo on this issue. Her use of humour derives from the fact that Sue Davies (line 6) is known in company B for being extremely efficient. Carrie thus draws on this in-group knowledge to invoke humour which mitigates the overall effect of her criticism. At lines 15–16 Carrie utilises humour as a mitigation strategy again by joking that her subordinates would have to use fish and chips as a bribe to get into the building. Repressive humour therefore appears to be an accepted strategy of linguistic politeness in this particular CofP.

As in company A, in the male-chaired meetings there are no examples of repressive humour in company B, again suggesting that it is not a strategy usually associated with these CofPs. Whilst the male chairs do use humour to fulfil other functions, repressive humour is not one of these. However, this does not mean that the male chairs attempt to gain compliance by using direct, unmitigated strategies typically associated with a male speech style, as previous research has found (West 1990; Holmes 1995). On the contrary, in *all* of the male chairs' attempts to gain compliance in *all* six CofPs, a variety of mitigation strategies are used.

Therefore, whilst repressive humour is not a tactic that the male chairs can be observed using in the data sample, within their CofPs, they are still paying attention to the face needs of their addressees, minimising the status differences between themselves and their subordinates. All three male chairs can be observed using a wide variety of mitigation techniques that previous researchers have found to typify a female speech style (Goodwin 1980; West 1990; Holmes 1995). For example, Holmes (1995: 74–75) outlines a number of hedging tactics favoured by females to mitigate directives, which are strategies that can also be used to mitigate the force of other FTAs and FAAs. These include ‘fall-rise intonation, tag questions and modal verbs, lexical items such as *perhaps* and *conceivable*, and pragmatic particles such as *sort of* and *I think*’. Goodwin (1980: 162) observes that linguistic forms commonly used by girls to mitigate their directives include ‘let’s’, which ‘signals a proposal rather than either a command or a request ... [it] shows neither special deference toward the other party nor claims about special rights over the other’. Other mitigating forms include the collective pronoun ‘we’, and Goodwin (*ibid.*) observes that often the plural subject will be accompanied by modals ‘can’ and ‘could’, indicating possibility rather than necessity.

In meeting A1, Steve utters various mitigation techniques ensuring that his attempts to gain compliance are repressive not oppressive. Example 9 is a typical illustration of the tactics Steve uses to mitigate his attempts:

(9) Steve wants his department to run their own induction day

- 1 Steve: Do you feel that (–) we need to do perhaps something like
- 2       (–) {department name} did?
- 3 Mike: Set a date to sort it out
- 4 Steve: Cos as Sue quite rightly pointed out (.) all it’s all been done
- 5       for us now it’s been written for us and the things etc. why
- 6       don’t we take advantage of that? (.) Sue’s offered her
- 7       support with perhaps John (–) er you know perhaps to run
- 8       that (.) why don’t we just set a date now?
- 9 Matt: Yeah
- 10 Steve: And say right okay let’s do it
- 11 Sue: Just get everybody in
- 12 Matt: Yeah

Steve embeds his directive using the syntactic form of an interrogative (lines 1–2), requesting that his subordinates express their opinions on

the idea of running their own induction day instead of oppressively commanding that they do it. This utterance also contains the hedging devices ‘perhaps’ and ‘like’, and the collective pronoun ‘we’ is used as part of a ‘need’ statement in order to express joint action and responsibility. Mike’s response to Steve suggests his compliance (line 3). Steve then attempts to convince his subordinates once more in lines 4–8. The directives are formulated indirectly through two requests, and he uses the collective pronouns ‘we’ (lines 6 and 8) and ‘us’ (line 5), to fulfil the same collective function. The hedges ‘you know’ and ‘perhaps’ (line 7), along with ‘just’ (line 8) are also used as further mitigation tactics. Steve will play no part in the departmental induction day which the meeting participants agree to, but his inclusive language suggests that he will be involved. He includes his subordinates, at least superficially, in the decision-making process and gains their immediate compliance.

In meetings B2 and B3 from the manufacturing company, male Chairs Rob and David can also be observed using a variety of mitigation techniques, very similar to those used by Steve in company A. Example 10 illustrates Rob using the collective pronoun ‘we’ on five occasions, along with the modal ‘may’ and minimiser ‘just’ to hedge his directive and to attempt to gain compliance repressively:

(10) The group have been discussing problems with ordering too much stock.

1 Rob: we we may just on some things we can say we’ll look at  
2 the forward order book on others we just have to take  
3 another (–) erm measure

In meeting B3, all of male chair David’s attempts to gain compliance are mitigated using similar tactics, illustrated in example 11 by the use of hedges ‘I think’ on three occasions, ‘just’ on two occasions, ‘you know’ and also ‘we’ and ‘our’ to emphasise a collective sense of action:

(11) David is discussing problems with the company’s stock

1 David: I just think we need to put I think if there’s something wrong  
2 we just need to put our house in order (–) quickly I think cos  
3 you know they can be very (–) strict

## **7. Discussion**

As there is no evidence of repressive humour from the male chairs, it was thought that providing a summary of all of the strategies that chairs

Table 2. Summary of the strategies meeting chairs use to gain compliance in 6 CofPs

Meeting no.	Gender of Chair	Mitigated Repressive humour		Mitigated: indirectness, hedges, inclusive pronouns		Unmitigated, bald on-record		Total
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
A1	F	5	10%	43	86.0%	2	4%	50
A2	F	1	5.6%	17	94.4%	–	–	18
A3	M	–	–	23	100%	–	–	23
B1	F	3	6.5%	36	78.3%	7	15.2%	46
B2	M	–	–	49	100%	–	–	49
B3	M	–	–	31	100%	–	–	31

use to gain compliance in all six CofPs would aid the overall interpretation of the results. This is presented in Table 2.

It is clear from table 2 that whilst there is evidence of the female chairs utilising repressive humour as a mitigation tactic, it does not occur that regularly overall. Indeed, this finding is similar to that of Holmes and Marra (2002), who observe that whilst humour is a very powerful and strategic device, it is not used that frequently in formal workplace settings, particularly when compared to more informal encounters. In all six CofPs, both female and male chairs most commonly use mitigation tactics other than humour, including indirectness, hedges and inclusive pronouns to mitigate the force of their less acceptable messages. Therefore, whilst the females do use repressive humour and there is no evidence of the males using this technique in the data sample, the distinct similarities between female and male chairs' attempts to gain compliance should not be overlooked.

Another notable finding also represented in Table 2 is that the only participants to issue unmitigated attempts at gaining compliance are female participants Amy and Carrie in their departmental meetings (A1 and B1) and not the male participants, which also goes against the findings of earlier studies (West 1990; Holmes 1995). Whilst a more comprehensive consideration of this finding is beyond the scope of the current paper, there is a clear exception here to the stereotypical assumptions of female and male linguistic behaviour.

Overall, the data analysis presents evidence which clearly disputes the stereotypical view that women lack a sense of humour in workplace interaction, thus according with the findings of Holmes *et al.* (2001). The fact that there is no evidence of the male chairs utilising repressive humour as a device of linguistic politeness in either company from two very different sectors indicates that, at least on the particular occasions of recording, repressive humour is a strategy that is favoured by the female chairs, which may be indicative of wider gender patterning. In-

deed, this small-scale finding accords with the large-scale, quantitative survey of Holmes *et al.* (2001), who found that female speakers were more likely to use humour than their male counterparts in workplace meetings. In a study that analyses the various multifunctional uses of humour in these CofPs (Mullany 2003), there is evidence that the female meeting participants take advantage of the different functions that humour can be used to fulfil on more occasions than their male counterparts.

However, whilst the female chairs can be observed using repressive humour as a politeness strategy in their particular CofPs, this does not mean that they are being more linguistically polite than their male counterparts. When the manner in which the male chairs issue their less acceptable messages is examined, there are no examples of them attempting to gain compliance oppressively, without mitigation. On all occasions, the male chairs pay attention to their addressees' face by using a number of strategies to mitigate the force of their utterances.

These examples illustrate that the democratisation and conversationalisation of discourse to which Fairclough refers has clearly taken place in both companies, with repressive discourse, realised through a variety of linguistic forms, being the most favoured strategy used by all chairs, regardless of gender. The only notable exceptions to this are the occasions where female chairs Amy and Carrie issue directives in a direct, unmitigated fashion, which again goes against previous language and gender findings. West (1995) equates such unmitigated, on-record forms with impoliteness. However, by following a CofP approach to politeness, the situation is more complex than this. Both Carrie and Amy issue direct, unmitigated directives in their departmental meetings, where all participants are directly subordinate to them. There is no evidence that at the meeting participants find either chairs' behaviour to be impolite, as both chairs are fully entitled to enact the power accorded to them by their roles as managerial superior and meeting chair. The norms and conventions of politeness are different in these departmental CofPs where it is perfectly acceptable for chairs to issue directives in an unmitigated manner. The findings of this study therefore suggest that there are a number of complex factors that need to be taken into account when analysing gender and politeness in the workplace, and a small-scale, CofP approach to conceptualising linguistic politeness helps to highlight these factors in specific contexts.

## **8. Conclusion**

By following a small-scale, ethnographic CofP approach to conceptualising linguistic politeness in the specific context of business meetings, it is hoped that a more intricate and dynamic investigation surrounding the

complex interplay between gender, politeness and power has been given. The focus on repressive humour has demonstrated that it can be a very effective strategy that superiors can use when enacting their power and attempting to gain compliance from their subordinates, and one that is favoured by female chairs. The gendered patterning is an interesting line of enquiry, and a larger scale project would determine whether the pattern observed here can also be found in different sectors.

The evidence presented in this study clearly disproves the findings of earlier language, gender and politeness studies which conclude that females are more linguistically polite than their male counterparts. Both female and male chairs appear to be heavily influenced by the change in organisational culture from oppressive to repressive discourse. The fact that evidence of this transition in workplace culture can be observed in companies taken from two very different sectors indicates that this change has taken place at the global level that Fairclough (1992) suggests. It is the overall intention that the analysis has demonstrated the need for a more context-specific, small-scale examination of gender, politeness and power, and that the usefulness of investigating the previously under-researched practice of humour in feminist linguistic research has also been proved.

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## Notes

1. The meetings recorded were strictly dictated by the companies themselves. I entered both businesses as an ethnographic fieldworker with the request to observe and record an equal number of meetings chaired by female and male managers. In practice, this turned out to be rather difficult. The data collection was hampered by the lack of female chairs in both companies, which is arguably part of the findings. Whilst both companies have a number of females at lower/middle levels of management, their numbers decreased dramatically in more senior positions. In company A, out of a senior managerial team of 11, only 2 were female. In company B, 2 senior positions were occupied by females in a team of 10. As more senior managers tended to be allocated the role of meeting chair, there were simply far fewer female-chaired meetings than male-chaired encounters taking place in both companies.
2. All names are pseudonyms. Transcription conventions:
  - (.) Indicates a pause of one second or less
  - (–) Indicates a pause of two seconds or more
  - [ ]
  - [ ] Double brackets indicate simultaneous speech
  - { } Indicates material was deleted for confidentiality
  - (xxx) Indicates material was impossible to make out
  - =
  - = equals signs indicate no discernible gap between participants' utterances
  - ((laughs)) double brackets give additional information

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