# Power and politeness: a study of social interaction in business meetings with multicultural participation

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## Abstract

In today's increasingly global economy, members of the same work team do not necessarily work in the same country or on the same continent. They speak different mother tongues and belong to different cultural backgrounds. Yet they are faced with the task of collaboratively working as a unified team in order to achieve the company's goals.

Drawing upon naturalistic data from meetings of a multinational corporation in Zurich and Amsterdam, this study aims to expand current understanding of workplace communication by exploring how two chairpersons and meeting participants use linguistic resources to contest and negotiate power relations without severely straining the corporate ties that bind them. Selected excerpts from the corpus illustrate the dynamic quality of power which can be emphasized or downplayed with the use of linguistic politeness. Polite language, as the data suggest, is not an add-on or a cushioning device to pave the way for the smoother application of power; in workplace interaction, it is a pre-condition within which power can be exercised.

High-ranking chairpersons may have the power to control the content, structure and direction of the meeting but they are constrained by the very same institutional authority from which they draw power. Lower-ranking group members can and do contest power but only do so without tearing at the walls that make the team a unified whole. Indeed, since it is what happens *after* the meeting that is the bottom line for most companies, it seems in the best interest of leaders and members to co-operate for the sake of the common goal, and consequently for the very survival of their organization.

## 1. Introduction

The language of corporate meetings, which until fairly recently was thought of as business-like, task-oriented and topic-centred (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997), actually performs important social and relational functions (Koester 2006; Holmes & Stubbe 2003; Spencer-Oatey & Xing 1998). Meetings are vibrant social spaces where people who work in the same organization can experience camaraderie and feel a sense of belonging. Meetings can also serve as an 'arena' (Mullany 2004: 14) where individuals vie for power which can threaten team cohesion and corporate solidarity.

This paper uses a face-saving theory of politeness to analyse how high-ranking chairpersons use linguistic politeness to mitigate the exercise of potentially face-threatening power over their subordinates. It looks at the communicative devices that lower-ranking team members deploy to challenge institutional authority and seize power. I would argue that an investigation into the intricacies of workplace interactions can add to our understanding of how social relationships are enacted through talk. Given the importance of good social relations and effective communication amongst work colleagues in today's increasingly globalized world, this study is timely and relevant.

### 1.1. *Previous Research*

Following the ever-increasing cultural diversity of the global workforce, there has been a growing interest in language, culture and business discourse. Spencer-Oatey (2008) examines the role of communication and rapport management across cultures while Koester (2006) explores how employers and employees use language to accomplish transactional and relational tasks. A multidisciplinary view of business language as discourse is presented in Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson & Planken (2007) while the role of discourse analysis in the understanding of organizations is highlighted in Grant, Hardy, Oswick & Putnam (2004).

In the last fifteen years, a number of studies have examined how language becomes a site for *doing* power and politeness in the workplace (see Mullaney 2004; Takano 2005; Vine 2004; Holmes & Stubbe 2003; Holmes *et al.* 1999; Diamond 1996; Pschaid 1993) and other institutional settings (Harris 2003; Rees-Miller 2000). The findings suggest that, first, power is not static and uni-directional but dynamic, negotiable and bi-directional; second, that face concerns and politeness go hand in hand with the exercise of power in workplace contexts; and third that linguistic politeness can be deployed not only as a redressive strategy but as a manipulative resource to gain compliance and cooperation, mask interactional intent and gain even more power. Previous studies also suggest that institutional rank is a poor predictor of how power and politeness are discursively manifested. I return to this point later in discussing the theoretical framework adopted in the present study.

## 2. Power and politeness in the boardroom

Power, a basic aspect of inter-group and interpersonal relations (Haslam 2001) and a characteristic feature of human interaction (Vine 2004; Johnstone 2002), is a heavily contested concept. It seems to escape satisfactory definition and this journal article is not the place to tease out its complexity and multi-faceted nature. Therefore, I shall focus on the *discursively and interactionally constructed* manifestations of power which is not pre-determined by corporate positions (Koester 2006).

Chairpersons have the greatest influence in the content, structure, style and goals of workplace meetings (Holmes & Stubbe 2003), thus, they become relatively more powerful than the rest of the group regardless of their corporate status and personal attributes (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris 1997). Verschuren (1999: 91) claims that this asymmetrical relationship enables chairpersons to "order, command and permit" while less powerful meeting participants may "ask and beg." However, my data suggest that the situation is more complex. The two chairpersons, who are also the highest-ranking group members in the meetings observed, do not just command, order and permit. Even during conflict talk – here referred to as instances where there are differences of opinion and overt disagreement between interactants – they mitigate their language and show face considerations towards the addressees, even at the expense of threatening their own faces. I return to this point in the data analysis section.

## 3. The data

The data consist of 22.5 hours of audio recording, collected in May 2005 from two of HyClean's meetings in Amsterdam and Zurich. HyClean[1] is an American multinational company that manufactures and markets cleaning products and systems. It has branch offices in more than 60 countries around the world. Negotiation for research access was facilitated by an informant who works for the company and is a long-time friend of the researcher's. Meeting members were informed of the research by the chairs of the two meetings a few weeks before data collection.

An Ipod Nano and an MP3 Player (one at the front and one at the back of the room) were used to record spoken interaction. Monologues (when individuals were giving slide presentations) were not transcribed. Four hours of recorded data were unusable due to background noise and unintelligible multi-party, free-for-all talks. The extracts analysed in this paper were drawn from five hours of transcribed data where participants were actively engaged in talk. Detailed observation notes taken during the meetings and interview notes were used to aid contextualization and interpretation.

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[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout for company, people and product names.

# 4. Data analysis

## 4.1. *Theoretical framework*

I have drawn on insights from pragmatics and discourse analysis. Analytical techniques are influenced by interactional sociolinguistic analysis of workplace discourses carried out by Holmes & Stubbe (2003); for explanatory framework, I draw on Brown & Levinson's (1987) face-saving model of politeness.

Brown & Levinson's theory revolves around the notion of face, a concept borrowed from Goffman (1967) which refers to the public self image of all rational adults in social interaction. It is claimed that everybody has face and face needs, which can be positive or negative. A positive face need is the desire to be well thought of, liked and admired by others; a negative face need is the desire to act freely, unimpeded and not imposed upon by others. Positive politeness strategies means using language that invokes belonging and shared common ground; negative politeness means using language that orients to the addressees' wants to be left alone and to be free from imposition. Linguistic politeness, which is the main concern here, refers to the linguistic features and strategies which speakers use to mitigate any form of communication that might threaten the positive face (e.g. criticisms, disapproval, disagreement) or the negative face (e.g. order, request) needs of the addressee.

Brown & Levinson's model has been criticized on various grounds (see Driscoll 2007; Lakoff & Ide 2005; Watts 2003; Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005; Eelen 2001; Meier 1995) including its cross-cultural applicability (see Nwoye 1992; Gu 1990; Matsumoto 1989), its notion of face (see Arundale 2006 for an alternative model of face; Spencer-Oatey 2005 for a discussion of different types of face), and its focus on conflict avoidance and social harmony (see Ermida 2006; Culpeper 1996; Bradac & Ng 1993). While taking these criticisms into consideration, I would argue that Brown & Levinson's face-saving view which emphasizes conflict avoidance and social harmony is a defensible approach in the context of workplace communication (though see also Spencer-Oatey's (2008) rapport management model). People who work in the same organization not only transact business; they attend to the management of face and social relations as well (Koester 2006; Vine 2004; Holmes & Stubbe 2003).

Brown & Levinson's theory of politeness is being used here as a preliminary descriptive framework against which empirical evidence can be contrasted. This study, however, departs from their model in its conceptualization of power and its application of a discursive approach in analysing spoken data. It is argued that contrary to what is suggested in Brown & Levinson's theory, power is not static but constantly moving in different directions. In order to capture this dynamic quality, sequential stretches of discourse will be analysed which differs from Brown and Levinson's reliance on speech acts.

## 4.2. Analysis

An overview of the transcribed data shows that both chairpersons used direct language when doing tasks that are expected of meeting chairs such as setting the agenda, checking for understanding and keeping the meeting on track, suggesting that these functions are not deemed face-threatening. On the other hand, both chairs tended to use a combination of negative and politeness strategies when performing potentially face threatening acts such as issuing instructions, expressing disapproval, disagreeing, giving orders and managing conflict talk. It can be argued that conflict talk, particularly when there are unequal power relations, are fertile sites for locating instances of *doing* power and politeness (Locher 2004; Holmes & Stubbe 2003). Therefore, I have selected extracts from the corpus that show how the two chairs – Patrick of the Amsterdam group and Fred of the Zurich group – handle conflict talk with two meeting participants.

## 4.2.1. Context: Amsterdam meeting

The Amsterdam meeting is a two-day event held every three months. It consists of 27 members who are either chemists or chemical engineers. At the time of the observation, 19 members were present (seven Dutch, three Germans, three British, two French, one Spanish, one Italian, one Swedish and one Norwegian). They are based in different parts of Europe and the Middle East. The goals of the meeting were: to introduce a new cost-reduction project, called ROK-2; to inform members of new chemical regulations and to announce a change in company structure.

In the extract below, Patrick, meeting chair and director of the Research and Development department, is giving a presentation on the proposed cost-reduction project ROK-2. Hugo, technical manager from Spain, interrupts Patrick and insists that there is no sense in undertaking ROK-2 because a very similar project, ROK-1, was a failure.

Extract 4.2.1.1.   *Amsterdam meeting: A cost-reduction project*

| 1  | Hugo | I SAID you last meeting[2], |
|----|------|----------------------------|
| 2  | Patr | yeah yeah |
| 3  | Hugo | in Spain, we increase the number of raw materials into ROK-1 |
| 4  | Patr | yeah yeah |
| 5  | Hugo | now with the formulation for instance of Summer Range (???) we are going |
| 6  |      | to increase to surfactants! you know, this is NOT A REDUCTION of |
| 7  |      | comple- complexity from the (???) it's our experience, this erm |
| 8  | Patr | we can talk about it for hours and and and except we don't have time for |
| 9  |      | this! but but yet I don't think there's a there's much of an argument for |
| 10 |      | us to to have, erm although yeah it's fun to argue// and erm have a |
| 11 |      | philosophical debate// think about it erm what's important for me is that |
| 12 |      | this company has made a decision to erm and the decision to yes |
| 13 |      | throughout the world and certainly within Europe and the Middle East |
| 14 |      | we're gonna significantly reduce our complexity |

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[2] Transcription conventions are in the Appendix.

Hugo starts with a combative stance and takes on a powerful discursive role with little consideration for maintaining the chair's face. In lines 8 to 14, Patrick, who is Hugo's superior, re-asserts his power and tries to keep the meeting on track by using off-record strategies such as overstatement (*for hours*) and contradictions (*except we don't have time for this, it's fun to argue*) to convey off-record sarcasm (Brown & Levinson 1987: 220). Patrick's use of *philosophical debate* (line 11) suggests his view of the argument as trivial and superfluous. This strategy is similar to the use of "tactical summaries" in negotiations where a summing up move is used by both parties to present their cause in a favourable light and unfavourable to the other (Charles & Charles 1999: 74). Patrick invokes institutional authority (*this company)* in line 14 to strengthen his position, thus increasing asymmetric distance between himself and Hugo. According to Holmes & Stubbe (2003: 150), retreating into the safety of institutional processes belongs to the "armoury of discursive resources" used by those in power to manage conflict talk.

After line 14 in the previous extract, Patrick proceeds with his presentation but as soon as he opens up the floor for questions, Hugo takes the opportunity to get his previous topic ratified:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Hugo | project, now another project! but we're still talking erm, |
| 2 | | have you considered repercussions for sales force? ROK-1, now THIS? |
| 3 | Patr | yeah, come back to the point that we NEVER finish what we've started! |
| 4 | | we never accomplish what we've anticipated and the end result is that |
| 5 | | the company makes a (???) loss// now if anyone else has a- any ideas |
| 6 | | on how to improve the and help this company// I'm I'm sure that we're |
| 7 | | all desperate for good ideas// so so sustaining the way we behaved and |
| 8 | | the way we behaved in the last year in the couple of years is is not |
| 9 | | a sustainable situation not a healthy situation// but that's why we've |
| 10 | | taken the decision and we can debate that endlessly but the company has |
| 11 | | made the decision that that one way forward to improve the health of the |
| 12 | | company is to significantly reduce the complexity that we have in the |
| 13 | | company now is that the right decision? Is it possibly – we'll know |
| 14 | | fully at the end if it's the right decision or not//if we continue |
| 15 | | to debate it and stay in the in the status that we are as a company |
| 16 | | is unacceptable. |
| 17 | Hugo | my personal view is that is that this is not the way to go but I accept |
| 18 | | I accept it because this is the rule (???) I will accept/// I will see |

Lines 10 to 16 show Patrick appealing to institutional authority (he uses *company* six times in a single utterance), which seems to leave Hugo no other option but to concede (lines 17 and 18). By invoking the *company* as 'higher power' Patrick tries to absolve himself of the liability for the decision being challenged. His use of the plural pronoun *we* is both curious and ambiguous because it seems to include different sets of referents. From lines 3 to 12, it appears as though he was evoking common ground with all the meeting participants including Hugo. However, in lines 13 to 15, he focuses on Hugo as the sole addressee (*we'll know fully at the end,*

*if we continue to debate*) and then directly appeals to the whole group to evoke solidarity and group membership (*we are as a company*).

It can be argued that the chair's strategic use of an appeal to common ground and group membership is designed to simultaneously gain cooperation from subordinates and compliance without being seen as overpowering. This is similar to strategies evident in Takano's (2005) study of powerful Japanese female executives where language is used to navigate between in-group membership to promote cooperation and out-group membership to exercise control over subordinates.

Hugo is careful not to impose his 'take' on the subject by prefacing line 17 with *my personal view* and in line 18 he expresses willingness to comply, albeit reluctantly. His use of *accept* three times might be an attempt at face-saving because of his vulnerable situation. If he insists on challenging the chair's proposal, he runs the risk of being perceived as uncooperative thereby threatening his group membership. His conciliatory move works to protect the chair's face as Patrick is saved from having to further disagree with him on record, thus committing a face-threatening act.

Both interactants might still be unconvinced of each other's position at the end of the encounter however; it seems apparent that they are willing to put their difference of opinions aside for the health of the company.

### 4.2.2. *Context: Zurich meeting*

The Zurich meeting is a one-day monthly event with nine core participants (three Italians, two Swiss, one French, one German, one British, and one Mexican) who come from various departments – finance, supplies, engineering and marketing departments. In this sense, it is more professionally diverse than the Amsterdam group whose members all have chemical backgrounds. The Zurich meeting has more of a "task-oriented and problem-solving nature", whereas the Amsterdam meeting is more "information- and reporting-oriented" (Holmes & Stubbe 2003: 63).

Extract 4.2.2.1. *Zurich meeting: disagreement over launch date and lunch break*

Joshua, innovation manager, has presented his marketing campaign to the team. He is proposing to unveil and launch a new product line in June. Fred, the chair and highest ranking member of the group, rejects Joshua's proposal.

| 1 | Fred | no! let's say let's put it in July |
|---|------|------------------------------------|
| 2 | Josh | fine with me |
| 3 | Fred | it's still early to change it |
| 4 | Josh | ok good |

Joshua agrees with Fred's proposed change (lines 2 and 4) seemingly without much of a fight. However, in the extract below, he assumes a more powerful discursive stance in spite of the fact that Fred is two rungs above him in the corporate ladder:

```
1   Fred   I asked you a few minutes ago when you communicated the price of//
2          the price recommendation for the 05 Series// which basis did you take
3          and you told me 7655 Swiss francs so [what is THIS?]
4   Josh                                        [NO I didn't] say that [ Fred]
5   Fred                                                              [you DID!]
6   Josh   no I DIDN'T ! what I did say I said I went I went to erm
7          the financial guy and said that would give you direct cost but now
8          we talk about version without SMB for now but it shouldn't confuse us
```

Line 4, which overlaps with Fred's line 3, signals the change in Joshua's power stance. *No* carries a marked status of negation and speakers tend to delay verbalizing it (Eggins & Slade 1997). However, Joshua asserts his position (lines 6 to 8) and refutes Fred's accusation. He then grabs a board marker and illustrates his price calculations on the white board. After the numbers in question have been clarified, Fred apologizes and praises Joshua profusely:

```
1   Fred   sorry you know I'm sometimes I'm getting too energetic when it comes
2          to prices // basically it's good work you've done is good a good work
3          very good work
```

By apologizing and accepting responsibility for his behaviour (line 1), and exaggerating praise (lines 2 and 3, using *good* four times), Fred humbles himself, threatens his own face in front of the whole team and anoints Joshua's positive face at the same time. This illustrates the dynamic quality of power that is evidently not pre-determined by institutional hierarchy.

The extract below is a further example of how Joshua, comparatively more junior in terms of age, length of service with the company and rank than Fred, seizes power. He manages to get his goals met (continue with the presentation) at the expense of the chair's goals (breaking for lunch).

```
1   Fred   project Apero can we agree on – (laughs and stands up)
2   Josh   Fred sorry to interrupt// quite a few slides to go you want to give them
3                what do we do with the=
4   Fred   you have to stay another month// I cannot do an Apero for you today!
           (laughs)
5   Josh   guys! guys! give me three minutes and we're through
6   Flor   (???)
7   Noel   [please] please let Josh finish his presentation//
8          he's worked very hard on it!
9   Josh   three minutes! three minutes guys? (pleading)
```

Joshua appeals to the chair to let him finish his presentation but is unsuccessful. He even addresses Fred by name in line 2 but to no avail. Determined to finish his presentation before the break, he turns to the whole group (with the support of his direct supervisor, Noel, in lines 5, 7 and 8). He invokes a sense of cohesion by using in-group markers (*guys*) and minimizing imposition (*three minutes*). Fred,

who was already on his way to the door, goes back to his seat and, with the rest of the team, listens to Joshua's talk. At the end of the presentation, Fred pays a compliment to Joshua for a job well done. It does seem that both chair and subordinate know that time is a precious commodity and actions need to be taken in a timely manner, irrespective of whose face is on the line. The collective, overarching goals of the team appear to supersede individual face needs.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

In the Amsterdam meeting, the chair appeals to institutional authority and the company to manage resistance from a subordinate team member. However, he also softens his exercise of power with positive politeness by evoking common ground and group membership. At the Zurich meeting, a team member seizes power from the more senior, higher-ranking chair by using in-group identity markers and non-imposing language to harness the collective power of the team.

The findings of the current study suggest that the metaphoric space within which interactants negotiate conflict talk is bounded by corporate culture and the overall goals of the company. It seems that the 'collective' face of the organization plays a bigger role in shaping conflict talks far more than each individual's positive face wants (the need to be liked and admired by others) and negative face wants (the need to act freely and unimpeded). Indeed, corporate identity and culture promote social cohesion and a singular view of how problems are defined, how issues and alternatives are evaluated and which actions need to be taken (Brown 1995: 57). As Diamond (1996: 49) points out, "the attempt to self assert and increase one's rank in the eyes of others is constrained by the necessity of keeping the group together, and of ensuring one's standing and belonging in it."

This investigation, consistent with other studies, has shown that power in the workplace is fluid, bi-directional and not tied to corporate rank or role (Vine 2004; Locher 2004; Diamond 1996). Data also suggest that linguistic politeness is implicated in mitigating the exercise of power. As Koester (2006), Holmes & Stubbe (2003), and Holmes *et al.* (1999) state, co-workers attend simultaneously to the transactional and relational goals of the interaction.

Contrary to Brown & Levinson's (1987) model and in line with the findings of Harris (2003) and Rees-Miller (2000), the present study indicates that an individual's relative power is not an accurate predictor of linguistic politeness. Being more powerful does not necessarily mean being less polite and being less powerful does not always equate with more linguistic politeness.

This research extends our current knowledge of social interaction in the workplace. It highlights a concept of power that is "not necessarily dominance but rather like an agency: a person's ebbing and flowing contribution to shaping the activity at hand" (Johnstone 2002: 113). I would argue that the 'ebbing' and 'flowing' of power in a business meeting context is both driven and bounded by the common goals that members hold. These common goals are as much about em-

powering as they are about controlling. In the end, everybody is measured according to the synergistic performance of the whole team. Power might steer the wheels of social interaction but it is concern for each other's face through the use of linguistic politeness that keeps the wheels well-oiled, making the ride towards the company's target destination smoother and with less friction.

## Acknowledgements

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## Appendix Transcription Conventions
(Adapted from Koester 2006 and Holmes 1995)

| | |
|---|---|
| (???) | unintelligible text |
| (word?) | guess at unclear text: e.g. I (apologize?) for the delay in shipment |
| // | a short pause |
| /// | a slightly longer pause |
| . | falling intonation at end of tone unit |
| ? | high rising intonation at end of tone unit |
| , | slightly rising intonation at end of tone unit |
| ! | animated intonation |
| - | unfinished utterance, e.g. false start |
| WORD | Words written in capitals to indicate emphatic stress: e.g. VERY |
| [words] | |
| [words] | simultaneous speech indicated in brackets: e.g. |
| | A:    mm// Did you    [read the report] |
| | B:                    [didn't have] the time |
| = | latching, no perceptible pause after a turn |
| (laughs) | description of current action, transcriber's comments |

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