Speech acts in the workplace: Lessons for learners

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What is ‘workplace’ language?

• No “easily definable” body of language
• Communities of practice
  – task-oriented
• Draw heavily on shared background knowledge:
  – specialised vocabulary/ turn-taking systems etc.
  – appropriate ways of doing speech acts
• Variation:
  – industry to industry
  – organisation to organisation
  – workplace to workplace
  – work station to work station
Workplace language

• Strong interpersonal dimension to communication at work
• Both transactional and interpersonal.
• Interpersonal
  – crucial to long-term effective communication
  – fuel unhelpful stereotypes
• Power differences
• Fiction of egalitarianism
What is a speech act?

- Language as performing a function
- Illocutionary force
  - meaning in context
- Locution
  - literal meaning
- Perlocution
  - effects on the audience
Example

• Context:
  – loading bay. Van just about to depart

• Foreman:
  – van door is open

• Force – shut the door
What speech act?

• Force:
  – refusal

• Perlocution
  – goes away
  – views of wife
  – self esteem

• Form:
  – apology
  – address term
  – statement

"I'M SORRY, SIR, BUT WE HAVE SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS FROM YOUR WIFE NOT TO SELL YOU A SPEEDO."
Why are speech acts useful?

• Useful starting point for analysis
• Easily recognisable way to understand how people do things with language - practical transparency (Bilbow, 1997: 470)
• Useful starting point for teaching
How to do speech acts at work

• Form does not equal force
• How do we interpret meaning?
  – context: setting, relationships, task
  – experience
  – relevance
Directives

• “Attempts of varying degrees [...] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” (Searle, 1969: 1)

• Form/ force
• Context
• Directness
• Mitigation/ softeners
Difference between a request and an order

• Relationship:
  – judge – criminal

• Context
  – inside court vs outside court

• A request or an order?
Challenges for learners

• NS settings - (often unconscious) expectations of appropriate behaviour
• Initiatives in Iceland
• Linguistic and sociocultural expectations:
  – dominant culture
  – industry
  – particular workplace
  – community of practice
• “misinterpretations sometimes bubble up into the tiny crevices of talk”
Different in different industries and workplaces: schools

- If you could just turn to page twenty-one
- Ciao guys!
- I’d rather you two didn’t sit together........
Different workplaces: childcare

- **Regulating routine:**
  - Can we all remember we need to keep our cups on the table

- **Regulating behaviour:**
  - OK. Excuse me, that’s a bit loud. What voices do we use inside?

- **Stopping children doing things:**
  - You don’t need to use your hands, just use your voice

- **Getting children to do things:**
  - Sitting up nicely? Bottoms on floor? Legs crossed? I’m waiting for….L. L, can you sit on your bottom?
Situational variation as power varies

- English
- German
- French
- Hebrew
- Spanish
Directives are important at work

- Ubiquitous
    2nd most frequent.
- Difficult to recognise.
- Challenging:
  - to make
  - understand when or how to mitigate/soften
- Yet speaking clearly – employability
- Serious if they go wrong
What does research tell us about NS directives?

• *can you or could you* (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989)

• Naturally-occurring data - variety of forms used at work.

• Imperatives:
  – *farms* (Weigel & Weigel, 1985)
  – *factories* (Brown, 2000; Newton, 2004)

- 38% of explicit directives downward and 30% equals / upwards = imperative
- 11% downward and 30% to equals / upwards = interrogative form
- Declarative = v. frequent:
  - modal, e.g. *you can go through this way*
  - marginal modal e.g. *you need to just check…*
  - conditional e.g. *if you could follow up with Kevin*
- What forms do learners know? (imperative / conventional polite request forms)
NS directives in office context

• Not always explicit
• 29% downwards and 67% to equals / upwards = implicit.
• Implicit directives - less direct /more polite, useful for learners
• Vine - different types:
  – partial elements
  – no elements but focus on the speaker’s or another person’s needs or actions, or on objects.
• Avoids direct reference to act - mitigating
Most common form

Focus on the speaker’s need for the action to be done e.g.

- *I’ll take those*
- *I’d like to hear about ..*
Softening directives

• Variety of ways
  – Syntax
    • e.g. modals, past tense, continuous
      I just wanted to ask you about my leave
      I was hoping we could make it the following the following even the following week
  – Adding/choosing words
    • e.g. please, just, a little, perhaps, for a minute
Support moves

e.g.

reasons or apologies

"In my rise to the top I forgot what was really important in life, Hargrove. Look into it and have a report on my desk by Friday."
Other ways

– Building solidarity
– Particularly important for female managers?
– Particularly important for Australia?
Directives, solidarity and gender

• Japan- females - *do* power less explicitly - power through egalitarian collaborative relationships (Takano 2005)
  – appropriately indirect + deferent (feminine)
  – neutralised gender
  – solidarity through support moves (reasons and preparators), alerters, humour, inclusion and hints

• Similar strategies by female managers in NZ Holmes (2000, 2006)

• Females and males - diffs in use of devices at their disposal
Directives and the learner (Aus.)

• French company in Australia, Beal (1994)
  – Anglo-Australians: French - blunt / arrogant
  – NS French: Anglo-Australians - wishy-washy / hypocritical

• Directives
  – AA - only 40% no softening device cf F 60%
  – AA - 25% - 2 or more softeners cf F 14%
  – F - simple, familiar softeners e.g. so
  – not tags, hedges, downtoners and understaters, combinations

• Transfer and proficiency
• Linguistic and socioculural
Directives and the learner (HK)

Hong Kong

• Chinese managers
  – westerners *aggressive, rude* and *direct*

• Western managers
  – Chinese staff - *cautious, evasive* and *non-confrontational*.

• Directives in business meetings:
  – Chinese - less likely to use them
  – Spoke much less often

• Differences in directive style:
  – Only westerners - direct forms
  – Much wider range of intonation patterns
  – Less formality
  – More personalisation *indefiniteness*, emphasis, minimization ‘bad’ language
  – Chinese - more frequently support moves after directive

• May reinforce negative views e.g. Chinese lacked “emotional expression”, formal use of lexis - “staid” (Bilbow 1997)
Directives and the learner (Aus.)

• High proficiency / teacher trainees - various subjects in Australian secondary classrooms
  – Even higher proficiency Chinese–
    • Like NS for conventional politeness
    • Less solidarity through a reduction in social distance
    • Maintained rather than reduced social distance.
  – Cf. NS solidarity through:
    • Informal language
    • Vague language

(Yates, 2000)
Why?

• Chinese participants less familiar - or less comfortable - with such solidarity-building strategies
• Even if noticed softening effect - not appropriate for the teacher role
• Learners need to understand and reflect on:
  – forms
  – why used
  – i.e. the murky world of the cultural values
Directives and the learner (Aus.)

- Intermediate level immigrant learners (Dinka + mixed background):
  - Less likely to use syntax
  - Even simples ones e.g. past tense/ continuous
  - Lexical mitigators, such as *just* or *hedges*
- Not forms themselves but use in softening
- How much mitigation may be expected in different contexts.  
  (Yates In press)
Directives and the learner (U.S.)

- Ming, Chinese immigrant
- Initially reluctant to make requests
- Used indirectness typical of Chinese speakers
  - e.g. provided context not direct request
- After a few months in workplace
  - Saw how ‘Americans’ tackled directives
  - Changed approach
    - First - direct requests prepared with plenty of context
    - Then - “the American way” - “directly, truthful” but mitigated with “things a little bit sweet” (Li, 2000: 75)
    - Felt empowered to take control of situations + gain in confidence
  - Both forms and sociocultural understandings - vital
  (Li, 2000)
Directives and the learner

• Cultural values
  – Are deep-seated
  – Relate to fundamental views of right and wrong
  – Sensitive approach necessary

• Ming *adding* skills

  I feel I am more adjusted to America, but I am still Chinese. And I feel right now, I don’t know in the future, I don’t want to change some part of me because I feel that’s good
A third way

- I don’t want people to forget that I’m not a native speaker; we come from different cultures and ways of thinking; if my language sounds too good people won’t remember that (St. John, 1996, 5)
Conclusions for workplace instruction

• Insights from speech act research
• Tools for learner analysis
• Flexibility to be used across contexts
• Intercultural competence
• Direct application into materials
• Can be built up from basic - advanced
• Link with employability skills
Thank you
Doing disagreement

• Disagreements handled differently and related to different styles of management and workplace cultures.

• Two of the disagreements involved direct expressions of *bald on record* disagreement among a highly competitive team where the direct expression of opinion was tolerated. Although those with more power – either in terms of rank, expertise or both – were licensed to state their views baldly, they nevertheless used humour to defuse the tensions around such overt expressions. The other two events unfolded over a longer period, but were also characterised by the use of humour to defuse tension.

• The fourth example - range of devices and strategies used by an employee to disagree with a proposal made by her manager and by Leila to soften the impact of her own disagreement. Zoe’s disagreement strategies included the classic yes but strategy and the proposal of an alternative. Leila responds positively at first, allowing the full expression of Zoe’s point of view. Only after some ten minutes of discussion does she use the ‘positive confrontation’ strategy of pointing out the problems with Zoe’s proposal, and she then attempting to integrate Zoe’s position with the one she herself holds (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003: 67). Overall, Zoe is converted to Leila’s position, but it takes time, and serves as an interesting example of how threatening acts may be negotiated at length over many turns in order to preserve face. What might be of particular interest to the learner here is not only how this is managed, that is, what moves and what forms are used, but also the fact that the act is performed in this way at all, particularly with someone of lower rank.

• This analysis highlights the variety of approaches that there may be in the making (and resolution) of disagreements in the workplace. The authors also argue that the styles exemplified may relate to gender preferences and individual styles of working. Such insights are useful for learners not only in highlighting some of the specific forms that can be used in the conduct of such workplace interactions, but also in illustrating the individual differences that exist between workplaces in how things are done. These examples yet again point to the necessity of exploring the cultural bases as well as the forms that may be used in any situation.
Learners and disagreements

• Miller (2008) naturally-occurring disagreements in an office where both Japanese and English was used.

• Although many of the devices used in Japanese and English - similar, cross-cultural assumptions re purpose or roles impact how direct and threatening speakers are perceived to be, even when they make appropriate use of routine mitigation devices.

• E.g. indirect expressions of disapproval by a Japanese account executive misinterpreted by an American copywriter because understood event differently
  – copywriter - opportunity to discuss his ideas
  – executive - occasion to tell his subordinate that his ad had not been selected for use.

• face-saving mitigation strategies used by the Japanese superior not recognized as mitigating disapproval of the ad, but only as accompanying the offering of an opinion.
Support mov
"I need an interpreter. Send in someone who speaks jargon."

"Err... Mr Robson, you don't need to use your mirror so frequently."
"SHRED THAT LAST MENTAL NOTE I GAVE YOU..."

"You goo-goo, you gaa-gaa. But when push comes to shove, you what-what."

"You don't have to look after them much at this age - they don't remember anything."
Threats to face
"That’s not what I meant when I said let’s pull out all the stops."
Directive as part of instruction

“When I let out a blood curdling yell and scream ‘Jesus Christ you’re going to kill someone’ I’d like you to apply the brakes...”