Review of: Power and Politeness in the Workplace

Janet Holmes and Maria Stubbe (Real Language Series). London: Longman.
2003. 198 pp. Pb (0-582-36877-4) £19.99.

Miriam A. Locher

This book presents research results from the 'Wellington Language in the Workplace Project', which started in 1996 and has as its broad objectives 'to identify characteristics of effective communication in New Zealand workplaces, to identify causes of miscommunication, and to disseminate the
results of the analysis for the benefit of workplace practitioners' (p. 12). It is therefore
important to stress at the beginning, as the authors do, that this book is not only based on the work of the two main authors, but also crucially on the work of other team members (among them Bernadette Vine and Meredith Marra). Many results of their research efforts have been presented in earlier publications as listed in the acknowledgments (p. ix). The present book gives an overall picture of the use and importance of language at the workplace in their corpus, with the special focus on politeness and power, and draws extensively on these earlier publications.

The book starts out with a brief discussion of theoretical concepts (Chapter 1) and the corpus (Chapter 2) before dedicating one chapter each to 'Getting things done', 'Workplace meetings', 'Small talk and social chat', 'Humor', and 'Miscommunication and problematic talk' (Chapters 3-7). The authors conclude by discussing implications and applications of their research, in other words, how their research findings can benefit the work communities which they studied. In what follows, each chapter will be briefly discussed.

In Chapter 1, the authors take a 'broadly social constructionist model of communication' as their starting point in claiming that 'interaction and identity construction are dynamic interactional processes where meanings and intentions are jointly and progressively negotiated between the individuals involved in a given interaction' (p. 11) and in emphasizing the importance of an understanding of the wider context of the interaction

for any such analysis. By means of examples from their corpus, they convincingly demonstrate, in a general way, how power and politeness are important dimensions in workplace interaction and how crucial a role context plays for analysis. In view of the extensive literature on 'power', 'politeness', and 'context', and of the importance of these concepts for their own study, it is striking how the authors avoid theoretical in-depth discussion of these concepts. In nine pages, they deal with all three research areas in which they mention facets of power and arrive at a very broad definition of politeness: 'mutual respect and concern for the feelings or face needs of others' (p.5). Readers who hoped for a theoretical contribution to power and politeness research will therefore be somewhat disappointed. This is not to say, however, that this book does not shed any light on how power and politeness playa crucial role in workplace interaction, as we shall see.

One of the strengths of this book is the corpus which the team has compiled for the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project. It contains approximately 2000 spoken interactions from 420 participants in 14 different workplaces (p. 13). Chapter 2 explains the methods of how the corpus was compiled, the difficulties encountered in this process and their solutions. Providing feedback to the individuals recorded as early as the data collection phase as well as after the completed research is highlighted and is listed as one of the reasons why the compilation of the corpus was so successful. This chapter gives a useful overview of the methods used which may help other researchers in their project designs.

While the corpus of the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project is one of the main strengths of this book, it is, however, unfortunate that the reader does not get a real feel for the diversity of the data. Often the same examples are discussed from several different points of view in different chapters. This clearly has the advantage of showing how multi-layered analysis of natural linguistic data ought to be, and also results in getting to know some of the individual interlocutors better. The disadvantage of focusing on only a relatively small selection of examples is that there is no emerging overall picture of the material in the corpus. This is further impeded by the, in my opinion, unnecessary abdication of any quantification other than the general description mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Chapter 3 deals with 'Getting things done at work', i.e. with being directive. The authors tackle this topic, for which both power and politeness are relevant, in three sub-sections: 'Being direct downwards', 'Mitigation and management between equals', 'Getting the boss to cooperate ^ requests and indirectives'. In the fourth section, they deal with 'hints', which are again discussed in different hierarchical situations. This chapter identifies a range of strategies used by the interactants illustrated with an excellent choice of examples. The only drawback here is that the theoretical framework on directives is rather limited and if mentioned at all reduced to observations in the chapter endnotes.

The analysis in Chapter 4, on workplace meetings, is based on the data from 80 meetings contained in the corpus. The definition of 'meeting' is functional, i.e. 'interactions which focus, whether indirectly or directly, on workplace business' (p.59). Meetings were found to vary considerably, which is why the authors offer a table with

useful dimensions for comparisons (p. 60) and three general functions of meetings: planning or prospective, reporting or retrospective, and task-oriented or problem-solving (p.63).The authors then exemplify with their corpus data how meetings are structured and offer two brief case studies of meetings in two different workplace environments. In conclusion, they stress the fact that, despite these patterns, 'each group is a unique mix of individuals and their experiences, and each group evolves its own particular practices' (p.86).

Small talk and social talk are at the heart of the analysis in Chapter 5. The authors found small talk to occur 'at the openings and closings of social encounters and at transition points within an interaction, easing the entrances and exits of participants and bridging the gaps between different discourse events at work' (p. 106).Within workplace interaction, small talk was found to 'oil the social wheels', relieve boredom or the intensity of the work involved (p. 106). Holmes and Stubbe especially stress the flexibility of small talk: it can be used as a managing tool or an expression of power relationships, as well as it can act at a personal level and 'do collegiality' (p. 107).With respect to power, the authors point out that 'it is generally the superior in an unequal interaction who has the deciding voice in licensing small talk and social talk' (p. 101). The strength of this chapter is the selection of examples and the analysis of the observed patterns. However, the usage of the term 'small talk' itself, which the

authors define as being part of 'social talk', is problematic. In their discussion they often use the two terms interchangeably and never make it quite clear whether they have tried to make an analytical distinction between the two (when does small talk end and social talk begin? does small talk always precede social talk? etc.). It is unfortunate that this difficulty is not discussed in the text, and that note 2, which deals with subjects editing their recordings and often deleting social talk which they thought to be irrelevant to workplace interaction, is not taken up and discussed in the main text.

Chapter 6 investigates the use of humor in workplace interaction. In a footnote, the authors define humorous utterances as those 'identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants' (p. 135).While the authors emphasize that humor is to a large degree an in-group evaluation (p. 122), in the chapter itself it is taken for granted that the fieldworkers and analysts involved are capable of detecting and interpreting humor. In the first half of this chapter, the multifunctionality of humor is stressed with linguistic illustrations for 'Nurturing harmonious relationships' ('Amusing workmates', 'Maintaining good work relations') and 'Licensing a professional challenge' ('Jocular abuse', 'Challenging authority'). In the second half, the authors present three case studies of workplace communities in which humor is used quite differently. In one community, humor is employed as a means to support one another and as a facilitator for progress in the tasks at hand. In the second community, humor is more robust in style, with jocular abuse and the team leader also asserting her authority with the help of humor. In the third community, humor is of a subversive and contestive kind, closely linked to status distinctions and challenges. The authors then summarize that 'humor is often used

to reduce tension, to manage potential conflict and to contribute to the management of problematic situations' (p. 135). Humor used in a subversive and contestive way is further discussed in the next chapter.

Miscommunication and problematic talk at work is the topic of Chapter 7. A variety of discourse strategies are discussed for problematic encounters either top down or bottom up, and two case studies of on-record and o!-record disagreement as pragmatic strategies are presented. The authors highlight that 'power and politeness consistently emerge as important dimensions constraining the ways in which participants negotiate and resolve miscommunication and problematic issues at work' (p.163).

In their final and concluding chapter, the authors return to one of their initial objectives: their research should benefit the work communities who took part in the research project. They briefly introduce the so-called Communicative Development Model emerging from their research in order to help employees to get integrated at work. This model is reflexive in nature and relies on the participants' evaluation of past interaction and planning of future interactions.

Power and Politeness in the Workplace does not offer many new theoretical contributions to the literature on power and politeness. Nor does the theoretical discussion of the concepts central to the individual chapters go into much depth. The book could clearly have benefited from a more detailed discussion of theoretical issues, although it would be wrong to focus solely on this shortcoming since the book has other important strengths and insights to offer. One of them is the corpus itself on which the results are based. The authors also write in an easily accessible style which makes this book attractive for a large readership. In fact, one of the main concerns of the authors, namely that their linguistic research results should ultimately benefit the people who participated in the study as well as other people engaged in workplace interaction, is clearly met in the clear and accessible way in which they present their results. Other strengths are the perceptive selection and discussion of examples. The authors impressively demonstrate how much analysis benefits from careful fieldwork and how much one can learn from close readings of data, looking at it from many different angles and thus unravelling the multi-layered nature of human interaction.

MIRIAM A. LOCHER
English Department
University of Berne
Laenggass Strasse 49
3000 Berne 9
Switzerland
locher@ens.unibe.ch