

Multi-Cultural Talk At Workplace Meetings: What Strategies Are Used?

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Abstract

This paper will examine the structure of “talk” at workplace meetings in a multi-cultural context. Such “talk” is usually transactional in nature, and hence task-oriented. In analyzing the “talk” at meetings, various linguistic strategies emerge as recurring patterns within a speech genre. The definition of speech genre from Duranti (1983:20) is used, and he defines it as “a recognized (by its users) unit of discourse with some well-defined features, such as sequential organization...constraints (and expectations) on (some of) its contents and form...” These will be categorized and described, and a frequency count would show the most frequently used strategy for achieving the task goals of “talk”. The data used in this piece of research were obtained from a food manufacturing company located in Klang Valley. It is a small medium-sized enterprise established locally, which supplies food items to local retailers as well as overseas customers. It is run by a team of managers under the leadership of a General Manager. About 80 Malaysians (of various ethnic backgrounds) are employed, and meetings are a regular feature of the company. The researcher conducted an ethnographic study of the company and audio-recorded two management meetings. Such naturally-occurring talk at work provides a rich and dynamic source of data for language analysis which can contribute to an understanding of what really takes place in the real world as opposed to simulated forms of meetings conducted in classroom contexts. The findings of this study would reveal some insights for trainers particularly those involved in language teaching in business and management disciplines.

1. Introduction

This paper sets out to describe the linguistic features of talk that occurs at management meetings at a multi-cultural workplace. In identifying the features of such talk, various patterns emerged in relation to the different ethnic and linguistic background of the “talk” participants. Before presenting the results of the study, a background of the study will be provided.

2. Talk at work

Business organizations are “busy and buzzing places” (Boden, 1994), and to get work done, people at work use “talk”. They talk at meetings, in teams, on the telephone, and along corridors, either face-to-face or in groups, or on the phones, and it is through talk that information is transmitted and transformed. This study looks at the nature of managerial discourse in verbal

interactions at the meetings of a business organization in Malaysia. It attempts to analyze the linguistic means of interactants in such discourse and how they use these to arrive at their communication goals. Specifically it investigates the linguistic strategies that shape the processes and outcomes of verbal interaction. A study of spoken interactions at business meetings at a micro-level of interaction has not been looked at and it is timely that such a research endeavor be undertaken to understand the dynamics of such interaction in a real workplace in Malaysia. On a wider scope, according to Boden (1994), although talk occurs every day in organizations, research in this area has been scarce. A number of studies have been done in professional settings, especially in the educational, medical, legal and political arena. It is therefore timely that the present study investigates talk in a Malaysian workplace, where staff come from multi linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and engage in talk at meetings at various levels. The call to carry out more studies in this field was also made by Holden (1989:43) as he explains that

“..we know surprisingly little about language usage and performance in business contexts and in relation to companies’ competitive quest for resources and strategic advantage... There is a need all in all for empirical investigations, which attempt to study language in the business world for what it is. These studies are necessary in order to enhance our understanding of language as a facet of corporate communication.”

2.1 Features of institutional talk

According to Drew and Heritage (1992:22), “talk” at work is a form of institutional work and it has three characteristics which makes it different from ordinary talk. One of the features is its goal orientation. At workplace, most talk is task-oriented, and therefore more structured. Speakers at work hence use more strategies to signal their discourse compared to those in ordinary settings. Their talk is also more transactional in nature. Another feature that is highly noticeable is the speakers’ asymmetrical roles. In the context of the present study it is obvious the chair of meetings is the person in authority and she is in control of the discussion. She has more speaking turns and goes into longer discourses than the rest of the meeting participants.

2.2 Cultural Profile of Malaysian speakers

Most employees in Malaysian organizations, particularly at local establishments, come from multi cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This is in relation to their ethnicity. The three main ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. The current study has taken language used by employees based in a manufacturing firm in Klang Valley located in Peninsular Malaysia. Infact the managerial talk at meetings come mainly from managers of the Chinese ethnic group. There are eleven participants at the meeting where only one male is from the Malay ethnic group and the other from the Indian ethnic group. According to Jamaliah Mohd Ali (2000), if a study on the patterns and features of language use is done in Malaysia, one must take into account the cultural profile of these different ethnic groups. Briefly, the culture of these three groups will be described.

There are nine managers from the Chinese ethnic group at the meetings and the GM who chairs the meetings is a Chinese female. She exercises an assertive style of management and this is evident in her language use at the meetings. Morais (1994) argued that the assertive style displayed by Chinese managers may be traced back to their preference for working independently. Their communication style is obviously more direct and less tactful. One example taken from the data is given below:

Example 1:

GM: MZ your side regarding the ah discussion on the high cost per unit ah due to lower volume . so you say you want to revise the budgeted volume can you revise budgeted volume .

This is an instance where the GM calls upon MZ, the customer service manager, to clarify the use of the term “revise the budgeted volume”. Although the utterance is given as a question, or in Tsui’s (1994) term, an elicitation for information, it is more a direct reprimand.

To continue with the example above, a few turns later, MZ responds but again the GM shows her assertiveness by reprimanding him. A third speaker intervenes to explain the use of the above term. He is CH, the finance manager., who is a Chinese male.

GM: =but then the company already accepted your budget for long I mean the last year budget

lah this year budget is already fix one

CH: = I think he is talking about the BSC measurement lah

GM: /oh BSC .

CH: /not the budget

MZ: /the invoicing

GM: /don't simply say budget budget budget budget ah my mind is budget you know

According to Morais (1994:358), "Malay subordinates are likely to accept directives and express reservations in private". This is tied to their "budi" complex, and Asmah (1992:23-24) explains "budi" as behavior which is not to be forthright or assertive, not being blunt or direct. From the example above, it can be seen that MZ did not give the clarification directly. Instead CH stepped in to help him.

Indians generally uses a more accommodating style of communication. Morais (1994) is of the view that "perhaps this is a way of coming to terms with their minority status in the country. She elaborates this by saying that the Indians are more likely to play safe by hovering around situational norms and rules of interactions. One instance of this from the data occurred when the GM addressed SV, the research and development executive, an Indian male. In the interaction, the GM is again annoyed at the way things have been done at the department and calls for more vigilance. The dialogue below demonstrates how SV responds to her.

Example 2:

GM: but why did you all send a sample which has such a great variance I just don't understand lah

SV: actually the production ah running we want to do the sample we use the manual but only the size a bit different

GM: quite a lot oh you see

SV: we do explain

GM: I was like how come

SV: because they want to test the quality not size

The example above shows how SV accommodates to the GM and tries to justify his action of sending a sample which did not meet the expectation of their client.

The cultural background of the speakers in the interaction, as described above, plays a significant role in the use of language and this in turn affects the linguistic features used. More analysis will be provided in the later section.

3. The role of meetings at organizations

Meetings are the heartbeat of any business organization and although work done outside of meetings is crucial to determine the success of any company, meetings are the place where feedback is obtained, tasks are meted out, and negotiations occur. Meetings cannot be taken as an isolated activity within organizations as they constitute the dynamism of the establishment. Boden (1994:131) states that meetings are “small worlds of interactive order, ritualized to some extent but decidedly dynamic”.

The call made by Boden (1994) to study organizations as they happen, particularly via their “talk”, poses a challenge. According to her, past researches on organizational structure studied events and decisions long after they occur, and many of these studies depended on interviews and questionnaires or documents, which lack authenticity.

At workplace meetings, particularly at the organization selected for this study, much of the interaction focus on practical tasks and specific activities related to their nature of work. At their meetings, emphasis is placed on factual and technical matters, and employees with their respective designations are expected to come into meetings with sufficient factual and technical knowledge and be prepared for their tasks at work. Management meetings usually have a pre-established format of interaction with a chairperson to facilitate their “talk” so that their interaction is guided to result in an effective meeting. According to Beebe (2006: 339), two factors contribute to effective meetings: they are structure and interaction and for a meeting to achieve success, there need to be a balance of the two. For a meeting to be “organizationally and interactionally meaningful” (Boden, 1994:91), the participation of its members is crucial. Some meetings cannot be effective if key members are missing as major issues that need to be raised at meetings cannot be carried out if the significant person is absent. She sums up by saying that

meetings are “are purposive encounters, encapsulated and organized, yet significantly organizing”.

The meeting is also seen as a speech event according to Duranti (1983:20) and for this study, this definition will be adopted. A speech event is “a recognized (by its users) unit of discourse with some well-defined features, such as sequential organization...constraints (and expectations) on (some of) its contents and form...”.

4. Research Site

As this is a data-driven research, it was necessary to locate a site where data in the form of naturally-occurring talk at meetings could be obtained. It was through the contact of a fellow colleague that the research site became accessible to the researcher. It is commonly known that most business organizations would not allow easy access to their workplaces because of confidentiality. Hence, upon having had the consent of the General Manager (GM) of the organization has enabled the researcher to embark on a challenging area of workplace discourse, i.e managerial discourse at meetings.

4.1 Background of the organization

The organization is a small manufacturing enterprise (SME) which has international links where English is the main language used on a daily basis and for all official matters. However with employees who come from multilingual and multicultural backgrounds, many other languages are also used on a daily basis at the workplace. The languages are Bahasa Malaysia, Tamil, Mandarin and Chinese dialects like Cantonese and Hokkien. The setting of the workplace where its employees come from various ethnic backgrounds allows for linguistic diversity and it also allows an in-depth study of its discursive practices at meetings. This company has two plants (A and B) located in Klang Valley and meetings are held regularly at both plants. For the purpose of this study, only the management meetings which are held at Plant B were used for analysis.

4.2 Management meetings

The main data is the spoken discourse of meetings obtained from the company's management meetings which is held monthly. This monthly meet is known as the Balance Score Card meeting (BSC). Two such meetings were recorded and they were attended by eleven managers/executives. The total time of recording for these two meetings came up to 228 minutes (3 hours and 48 mins). The BSC meets are management meetings and basically form the backbone of the company. BSC meets are crucial as it involves the managers coming together to report on work progress, to assess work which has been done and to project future plans. They are held once a month, at the meeting room located in Plant B. There is an agenda provided before the meeting begins. As the meeting commences, minutes of the previous meeting are being read and discussed. This is usually a long meeting lasting an average of 1 ½ to 2 hours. The GM's personal assistant is solely responsible for taking the minutes and distributing them after they are ready, and preparing the agenda for the next meeting.

4.3 The participants

All department managers attend the BSC meet and most of them have more than 10 years of working experience, with at least 5 years at this company. Apart from 2 finance executives and a personal assistant, the rest are department heads. The company adopts a more traditional hierarchical organizational structure and hence it practices a top-down approach of management. The GM is the main leader and all the other department heads report directly to her.

5. Research Method

After having given the background and nature of the workplace, a short description of the methods used in this study is provided here. The study commenced with an interest in looking at language used at workplaces, and for the present study, it was out of practical reasons that one company was identified as the research site. One main reason for this is the accessibility factor. Doing research at workplaces is difficult because of this. Various types of researches are carried out at workplaces which include educational institutions, hospitals, courtrooms, and business enterprises. All those involved in such researches have not failed to mention the difficulties and ethical considerations that they encountered in the process. Hence in the current study, after having identified the scope of the research project, the researcher sought to locate a site that would allow the recording of language use at work. A case study approach adopted enabled such a study to be conducted. The company which deals with food manufacturing permitted access to

its work site. The researcher also negotiated for permission to audio record the spoken interaction among its employees during their meetings. A quasi-ethnographic approach was adopted for this study as well.

Once the researcher was able to get into the organization, observation was done on certain days over a four-month period. Field notes were taken. Following that the recordings were transcribed. This was done verbatim, and then checked by a moderator for accuracy of transcription. After that the transcription was modified to suit the needs of the analysis. In employing an ethnographic approach, the researcher was able to participate in the going-on's of the company's daily activities. Also, during meetings, the researcher was allowed to sit in to take notes to supplement the recordings. Participation in this company was covert although the researcher was able to mingle freely and socialize with members of the workforce.

6. Discussion of Findings

This study aims to provide a linguistic description of talk at meetings. And since talk at meetings forms the primary data, a description of the context is also significant. Hence an ethnographic approach is included in the study. This study is also a data driven piece of investigation. It is from the data that the linguistic features are extracted, described and explained. The study hence aims also to describe the linguistic features as they are encountered in the context of management meetings. To do this, an analysis of naturally-occurring talk at such meetings using an established framework of analysis proposed by Tsui (1994) is employed. She refined and modified the framework developed by Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) where a typical conversational exchange is made of three moves: an initiation (I), a response (R), and a follow-up (F), or more commonly known as the IRF exchange model. Although Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) model was based on spoken classroom discourse, Tsui (1994:25) argues that this basic three-part exchange can also be applied to non-classroom spoken discourse and is in fact "more powerful" than the adjacency pair concept proposed by Conversation Analysts (Schegloff:1988).

Based on Tsui's (1994) model, the basic unit of interaction is IRF and this is used as the framework of analysis in this study. Each move is made of various acts such as in I, there are Elicitations, Informatives, Requestives and Directives. Within these acts are subclasses. For the purpose of this study, the focus is on Requestives and Directives. This is mainly due to the fact that the data obtained revealed both these are most frequently used at the management meetings.

6.1 Directives

Tsui's (1994:117) definition of a directive is that it is an act which prospects a non-verbal action from the hearer, and the hearer has no option but to comply. Directives are characterized by imperatives and can be further classified under two categories, i.e. those

- (i) issued for benefit of the speaker (Sp)
- (ii) issued for benefit of the hearer (Hr)

According to Speech Act Theory (Searle, 1969), imperatives are acts used by speakers when they attempt to get the hearers to perform an action for the speaker's benefit. For Tsui (1994: 119) in addition to explanations based on linguistic behaviours given by others, she added a further dimension for distinction, which is that there is a difference in discourse behaviours. This is explained below:

- Directives which are advisory can be responded to by thanking and appreciation – known as advisives (they are less compelling because to do this depends entirely on the Hr)
- Directives which are mandatory cannot be responded to by thanking and appreciation. They are known as mandatives (where the Hr acts for the benefit of the Sp only)

6.2 Requestives

According to Tsui (1994:91), there are 5 subclasses of requestives and they are:

- (i) request for permission

- (ii) offer
- (iii) request for action
- (iv) invitation
- (v) proposal

Although requestives appear very similar to directives, their discourse function differs. A request gives the Hr the option of complying or not complying, whereas a directive does not. Requests are intrinsically face-threatening acts, they either predicate a future action of the Hr and in so doing put some pressure on the Hr to do or to refrain from doing an action, hence infringing on his freedom of action. Or they predicate a future action of the Sp and in so doing put some pressure on the Hr to accept or reject it, hence incurring a debt or responsibility for the action done. There are some ways to minimize the threat, and that is by using hedges, apologies, softeners where the Hr may be able to save face. One way is to present one subclass of Requestive as another subclass. This can be done by way of linguistic manipulation and out of politeness.

6.3 Use of directives and requestives

Directives used are mostly issued for benefit of the speaker. In the examples given below, the managers who comply to the GM's orders do so without questioning. Most of the directives are mandatives.

Excerpt 1

GM: *no need to explain* the green ah . *just go on red red* one umm ... the third party one .. is explained already .. *only discuss about the ... ASA side lah .. I think the rest are quite alright* ah except for ... number of complaints BG has already answer there ... there are three three complaints ah

BG: = yeah

In excerpt 1, no modality or hedging used. The directives given by the GM at the start of a meeting, places her without doubt as the person in authority. The hearer is the production manager BG, who merely listens with no comments nor interruption. Ethnographic notes also reveal that there was no nodding, merely passive listening. This seems to imply that BG is ready to comply with what was said and when the GM shifts her talk from directives to a question “there are three complaints ah”, BG latches on with an immediate positive response.

In another example (see excerpt 2) taken from the same meeting, the GM is observed to be instructing the human resource manager, who though does not directly comply, takes up the directive by giving her opinion. She does not object to the directive. Instead she offers an explanation of why English and Bahasa would be better languages to use in applying the concept of 5-S. Here she is seen as complying with the GM, who had earlier emphasized that she cannot cope with Japanese.

Excerpt 2

- GM: CH you report on admin side *LN you report on the training of five-S* what have you done to support the training what have you done to help them be aware of all this five-S are they all very clear about what is five-S you see if you as me I myself cannot remember the the I can only if you ask me the English one maybe I can lah but the Japanese one I will not be able to remember everything so now do we want to use English or do we want to to use Japanese because Japanese to us is more difficult to remember if in English form maybe it's clearer
- LN: *I still feel English is better because*
- CH: should be both Bahasa and English
- LN: because Bahasa and English is quite okay but not Japs

Another instance of a directive is seen in excerpt 3 below. There is a display of annoyance as ethnographic notes revealed. The meeting was about to end and yet an important issue was raised regarding research and development. The person in charge of this is SV, who has been reprimanded with mandatives. The GM uses direct imperatives without hedging and she kept repeating to drive home her point. These are seen italics in the excerpt below.

Excerpt 3

- GM: aiyoh friend you never learn you never learn do you agree with me eh *you cannot say like that* you know sample is a sample *you cannot say samples ah they don't care about the size* they care about the texture if I am sending a samples ah I will make sure my samples ah comply with the fact of everything *you cannot give me a answer saying that* they are only testing on the texture they are not on the size aiyoh when you do a mistake you say yes lah you know it's my mistake that I do not look into the size cannot answer people like that you know you agree or not lah agree or not you must agree lah you know why when you all say things like that I feel not right lah cannot if you all didn't do the job well ah you tell me lah I did not check carefully next time it will not happen say oh they don't care about the size they care about the texture
WM what else they say the size is different some other attributes also not right ah
- WM: weight and (?)
GM: even weight eh can't you all send sample (?)
SV: weight
GM: they say like that lah

Generally, from the data obtained, there were fewer requestives than directives. Most of the requestives are those calling for action, and like directives, they are all complied to.

In excerpt 4 below, a request is made by the GM to CH (who is the finance manager). The meeting has gone on for more than an hour and from the recording and ethnographic notes, it is observed that the GM is not too well that day. She has reached a point when she felt she needed to hand over the chairing task to a fellow manager, so she calls upon the CH. CH immediately replies with “okay”. This request for action is immediately taken up with no question.

Excerpt 4

- GM: picture of five go through the minute lah minute today is very er everybody mind is not so ready to talk all of you still Monday blue very blue I hope that sometime at meeting you all talk
CH can you chair for me ah
- CH: *okay*
- GM: (?) I don't want to talk anymore (?) you talk

The use of the question form “can you” shows that the GM is making a polite request. In addition to that, when she referred to WM, the sales manager, she added “please”, a rare linguistic feature from the GM's corpus of words (see excerpt 5). This implies that she is making a difficult request and is highly hopeful that WM complies with no objection. In WM's direct “yeah” reply, it again goes to show there was also total compliance.

Excerpt 5

- GM: *so can you all do a few more trial runs* to ensure that this can be reproducible lah if there is any change you all better settle down before actual production for RH you know ah RH is so difficult he is such a difficult customer and if you people ah take it lightly ah I don't know what to say lah huh *WM can please ah cc every email to BG*
- WM: yeah
- GM: all the discussion that you have with RH to BG to R and D as well and then they will appreciate how difficult

Excerpt 6 illustrates another such instance, although with a different manager. This time it is SS, the purchasing head. She complies by saying “sure” almost instantly.

Excerpt 6

- GM: can you get this communication flow out
- SS: sure
- GM: the morning discussion thing you see lah on that day if JN is there and your people is there they talk already

Conclusion

From the data obtained in this study it is found that more directives are used. This is probably due to the fact that the chairperson of the meeting uses an assertive communication style. The authority of the chair is unquestionable and even though the organization is made of a workforce who are from multi cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the act of direct compliance upon given either directives or requestives were similar. This shows that their backgrounds did not affect the strategies they used. Rather they are more influenced by the authoritative style of the chair.

This is a preliminary study on the use of strategies by participants at meetings and a more in-depth investigation may show why more directives were used rather than requestives. However this data has shown interesting communicative patterns which have emerged from how directives and requestives are used at work. The results of the study can be used to help business communication trainers in their efforts to instruct those in the field to be better communicators at work so that work can get done.

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APPENDIX

Transcription convention

. a short pause
.. a pause of less than 10 seconds
... a pause of more than 10 seconds
/ overlap
= latching
(?) cannot be transcribed due to inaudibility

(Adapted from Du Bois et al. 1992)

Biodata:

Ms Teoh Mei Lin, a lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics (UM), is also pursuing her Phd and her research has taken her into the real world of “work” where she was able to obtain naturally-occurring talk at meetings of a company. Currently she teaches Presentation Skills, ESP and English Proficiency at the University.