English and Power: doing intervention and research at the same time

Abstract

English and Power is a corporate learning and development programme and a process for doing sociolinguistic leadership research.

At a practical level, the workshop helps people to strip back the meaning in meetings and interactions and develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of power and how this is established, maintained, and challenged. In terms of research, the preparatory and workshop activities elicit narrative data about shifting professional identities and about the lived experience of influence and inclusion.

In this session I will explain the steps and activities involved in the English and Power programme in more detail, concentrating first on the intervention as a learning and development event. I will then go on to give an overview of the sociolinguistic analysis of some of the data from the five programmes run in Spain and Portugal between April 2013 and November 2014. Finally I will ask how far it is possible to do intervention and research at the same time.

Background

My doctoral work, which takes linguistics as its analytical perspective, sets out to study the relationship between language, power and performance in multinational corporations.

The research takes a multi-disciplinary approach to examining the performance of inclusion in corporate conversations. I am interested in understanding to what extent cultural and gendered patterns of workplace interaction (re)produce a “cycle of exclusion” which reinforces mono-cultural practices and continues to prevent women from accessing the most senior positions in multi-national corporate settings. Research in both Management and Linguistics illuminate this issue and I draw on both. However, in order to engage with leaders and managers about just how their linguistic choices constrain their leadership opportunities, I have had to develop research methods which are, at one and the same time, practical and immediately applicable development interventions in their own right.

My theoretical stance is framed by Leadership and Management Learning and some of the current debates around the diverse experiences and practices of women leaders (Stead and Elliott 2009), the performative accounts of gender (Gatrell and Swan 2008), and the social construction of leadership (Grint 2005). These themes chime with current academic
debates in Linguistics particularly with respect to gender identities. Gender and language scholars theorise the performance of gender (Butler 1991, Baxter 2006) as identities and practices rather than fixed notions of self and there is a common interest in the fluidity of identities across Management Learning (Ford 2006) and Linguistics (Marra and Angouri 2011). As a whole this body of work takes a critical perspective on organisational practices and understands learning as situated in everyday social practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Although critical scholars are interested in the fine detail of local practice (Alvesson and Karreman 2000), and current academic debates focus on such situated practice (rather than consciousness) as the site of learning, there is little in the way of detailed linguistic analysis of how such situated learning might be understood as being situated in talk. My research aims to develop some of this linguistic detail.

In order to work with these ideas and interests in multi-national corporations however, I have had to develop a different way of talking about what I am doing. I explain that I am working on power in interaction, doing practical research into the underlying dynamics of gender, culture and language at work. I am then able to discuss clients’ interests from a corporate perspective and show how the project illuminates patterns of conversations which affect the performance of multi-cultural management and leadership teams. It is usually very clear to people that what gets talked about, and the way it gets talked about determines what gets done. The power to influence outcomes in meetings where breadth of perspective is required lies not only in personal skill; it comes also from awareness of and competence in the subtleties of interaction - and especially in a more thorough grasp of how power and opportunity are mediated through talk. Looking through the lens of language can offer those in leadership roles an understanding of how it is possible to re-structure who gets to speak, who gets to interrupt, how new ideas are brought in, how consensus is collectively understood, who gets to take decisions and ultimately how actions are sequenced and co-ordinated.

The example of English and Power

I am basing my empirical study on intervention research, which I am defining as work which offers value for my corporate clients while also generating data for my research. I am interested understanding how professionals talk about their experiences. I want to know what people foreground in the recounting of these stories. Is it gender? Nationality? Culture? Professional practice? Status? English language competence? A blend of these? (Spencer-Oatey, H 2000, Angouri and Marra 2011b). To this end I have designed a programme addressing influence, language and power which is targeted at male and female managers transitioning into more senior roles. At a practical level, the workshop helps people to strip back the meaning in meetings and interactions and develop a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of power and how this is established, maintained, and challenged. In terms of research, the preparatory and workshop activities elicit narrative data about shifting professional identities and about the lived experience of influence and inclusion. This in turn helps me understand how the participants perform
their (gendered) identities to enact power (Holmes, J 2006, Mullany 2007) and to
determine which conversational strategies best enable them to engage in international
managerial practices.

In the session I will explain the steps and activities involved in the “English and Power”
programme in more detail, concentrating first on the intervention as a learning and
development event. I will then go on to give an overview of the sociolinguistic analysis of
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