

## **“Just do it ...!”: Discourse Strategies for ‘Getting the Message Across’ in a Factory Production Team.**

MARIA STUBBE

School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies  
Victoria University of Wellington  
maria.stubbe@vuw.ac.nz

### **1. Introduction**

This paper presents a brief overview of the discourse strategies used by the members of a factory production team as they talk with one another during the course of a shift. The analysis demonstrates that, contrary to the stated perceptions of the staff involved, ‘getting the message across’ consists of much more than just transferring information accurately from one individual or group to another in a given context. Rather, successful communication in this setting involves a complex joint negotiation of meaning which may extend well beyond the boundaries of a single interaction. This complexity is apparent in the data in two main ways.

Firstly, as has been amply demonstrated elsewhere, the data confirm that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between linguistic form and interactional function. Meanings can be (and usually are) constructed at a number of different levels, with verbal exchanges performing important social and interpersonal functions, as well as the transactional meanings such as giving an instruction or explaining something to which participants orient overtly. The most direct or economical discourse strategies are therefore not necessarily the most effective (cf Holmes et al in press, Stubbe and Vine in press). For instance, a directive may be expressed very directly using an ‘on-record’ discourse strategy like the emphatic imperative *Just do it!* in the title, or by a variety of less direct, more consensual devices such as suggestions or requests. The particular strategies and linguistic forms chosen to express a given transactional meaning play a vital part in building and maintaining good relationships, which in their turn contribute to more effective task-oriented communication within the team.

Secondly, the data provide clear evidence that both the sequential structures in a particular interaction and the participants’ wider contextual knowledge are essential interactive resources which participants use to come to a shared interpretation of what is going on (Drew and Heritage 1992, Gumperz 1992). Workplace interaction, especially in a factory environment, is typically highly context-embedded. The successful negotiation of meaning is dependent on a great deal more than the verbal interaction itself, including shared access to and understanding of the work activities, physical objects and processes referred to in a particular exchange, knowledge about what has gone before, the role relationships involved, the kind of talk appropriate in each setting and so on. Because of these dense and multiplex intertextual links, many workplace

conversations can perhaps best be characterised as connected episodes in an ongoing dialogue, rather than as a series of separate interactions.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The data

The data excerpts analysed here are drawn from approximately 30 hours of audio recordings and related ethnographic information, collected at a Wellington soap products factory during the pilot phase of a collaborative action research study, a recent extension of Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project (see Stubbe 1998). The primary language of communication in this factory is English, but the workforce is multicultural and includes many people for whom English is a second language. Data was collected from the 'Power Rangers'<sup>2</sup>, identified by the factory management as their top-performing production team. This team has 20 core members, 16 of whom were male, with over half of Maori or Pacific Island ethnicity. The team co-ordinator (TCO) is a Samoan woman, well-respected by her own team, other workers and factory management alike.

The production team works in two separate areas. One is a manufacturing area upstairs, where operations are monitored from a computerised control room. The second area is the packing line on the factory's ground floor. Here, the workers move around a lot as they monitor machinery. Contact between the manufacturers area and the packing line is maintained mainly through the use of the factory-wide intercom radio system or telephone calls. Audio-recording was undertaken for a rolling three to four hours a day over successive shifts in order to obtain samples from each part of a typical day and each day of 4-day shift.

## 3. Data Analysis

The aim of the analysis was twofold: (1) to examine the range of discourse strategies used by team members to convey information and to persuade others to do things during the course of a shift; and (2) to problematise two key questions which were seen as having very straightforward answers by the participants: (i) what is the message? and (ii) how is it being communicated? In doing this, I found it useful to consider four different analytic dimensions, representing continuums, rather than bipolar categories:

Referential meaning-----	Affective meaning
Explicit/direct strategies-----	Mitigated/indirect strategies
Simple 'transmission'-----	Joint negotiation/co-construction
Localised meaning----- (Single interaction)	Intertextual meanings (Related interactions)

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Chris Lane for this point.

<sup>2</sup> All names given here are pseudonyms.

The following examples illustrate these four dimensions, and the differing levels of complexity involved in defining what a given 'message' actually is, and how it is constructed by the participants.

### 3.1 Defining effective communication

The initial starting point for analysing the data was a concern expressed by the TCO that team members did not always seem to 'take on board' what she or others told them, thus leading to various problems with the production process. She was keen to identify some communication strategies which would help remedy this situation. One example of this which occurred during the pilot study involved a breakdown in communication between the packers and manufacturers about how many tonnes of a particular type of soap powder were to be produced, which resulted in an 'outage' on the packing line of several hours. Cases like this help to explain why factory personnel see the accurate communication of information as being of prime importance, as miscommunication at this level can clearly have costly and highly visible practical consequences (cf Coupland et al 1991). In this setting, when team members speak of 'getting the message across', they typically frame communication in terms of a transmission metaphor, focussing on a fairly explicit and localised transfer of referential meaning. Excerpts 1 and 2 provide examples of successful routine interactions which do fall largely at this end of the four continua.

- (1) RU      copy Lesia  
 LF      cool  
 RU      bin 29 should be your last bin on line 1  
 R W     bin 29 did you say?
- (2) GT      copy kiwi copy kiwi  
 RU      what's up  
 GT      stand by and I'll give you the figures bro  
 RU      yep go  
 GT      for the line 1 acma rainbow flight we need 24 tonnes 24  
 RU      yo bro  
 GT      ... then we are on orange wave orange wave for line 1 orange  
 wave we need two hundred and fifty six tonnes two five six

In these excerpts, the interactants are communicating via the radio. These examples clearly qualify as 'transmissions' of a message in both the literal and metaphorical sense, and the speakers use typical strategies for avoiding potential 'breakdowns' in communication based on building in redundancy. In excerpt 1, the message is followed by a clarification request from LF (*bin 29 did you say*). In excerpt 2, GT uses explicit directives and statements (*stand by, we need 24 tonnes*), together with regular repetition in an effort to ensure the details are picked up without error, while her interlocutor provides regular acknowledgements (*yep go, yo bro*).

The next excerpt involves much more joint negotiation, and the strategic use of less direct linguistic forms. HW has asked YY in stores if there is any more glue, as they have run out on the line. He has offered her some, but she is not

sure if it is the right formula. Clearly this is not a case where either participant is simply conveying information; rather they are jointly engaged in solving the problem. HW is also careful to use attenuated forms to question YY, who is trying to help solve her problem, rather than using more direct strategies which might make him less inclined to cooperate.

- (3) YY well we may not have any glue then coming in  
 HW that's why I need to know if all those buckets are ours no one else uses those eh on site?  
 YY well if they're there you need glue use it they're not reserved for anybody  
 HW yeah but it might be the wrong glue

### 3.3 Constructing meaning across contexts

In the final part of the analysis, we will follow an issue through to illustrate how meaning can be co-constructed across the boundaries of different contexts and interactions, and how speakers use a wide range of strategies which allow them to simultaneously pay attention to both interpersonal goals (e.g. motivation, morale, team spirit, the other's individual face needs) and transactional goals (e.g. giving instructions, criticising, coaching).

Excerpt 4 is taken from an early morning briefing meeting. GT is telling the packers that there have been some serious delays caused by their mistakes with documenting the packing codes.

- (4) GT the um the [product] that was packed on the other two shifts line two was put on hold because the pack code was wrong and that should have been picked up a lot earlier on the packing line but it wasn't and that's because the checks aren't done properly they're done like this bullshit it's not checked properly now the day before yesterday was it the day before yesterday lesia we did the same thing we did exactly the same as the other two shifts did not checking what we're packing people just take it for granted what's on the outside on of those cases and packets are right when i went over to check the line three check list it didn't have the pack code right ..... when you do the checks check the case off the lay card if they don't match there's something wrong # stop the line # if the lay card says you've got five numbers on you should have five numbers on the pack code that's what you put in there not four just 'cause it's got a zero on there doesn't mean it doesn't count it does count so make sure you check them properly ...'cause like i said it's just one person's stupid mistake makes the whole lot of us look like eggs (5) check them properly [laughs] we shouldn't blame Lesia cos he's got a good memory  
 LF and that was the end of the run [general laughter]  
 GT please fill them out properly fuck youse

What exactly is the message here? In terms of content, it can be analysed into four main topical themes:

1. There is a recurring problem with the packing codes;
2. This needs the team's serious attention because it is causing production delays;
3. It is a tricky issue, but careful checking is the key;
4. Detailed information about what to do.

There are also several layers of affective meaning which GT seems to be conveying here:

1. She is very annoyed about the situation;
2. She is critical of the team;
3. The team should be pulling together better- they are all in this together;
4. She is playing the tough boss, but she can still have a laugh along with the team.

GT uses a varied array of discourse strategies to 'get the message across' in all its complexity. She dominates the floor for most of this sequence, making heavy use of repetition, lengthy explanations and explicit directives to convey her four main content points. She uses a deliberate, emphatic intonation pattern, especially when delivering imperative statements (e.g. *#stop the line#*). At the same time she uses a number of complementary strategies to convey the various affective meanings identified above. Her tone of voice clearly signals her irritation, as does the degree of repetition and remarks such as *that should have been picked up a lot earlier*. Her use of impersonal constructions and the pronoun *we*, together with the fact that she is addressing the whole group, serves to minimise any potential loss of face for the individuals responsible (although GT knew who they were), e.g. *we did..the same, people take it for granted*. Finally her explicit appeal to the importance of team spirit (*one person's stupid mistake makes the whole lot of us look like eggs*) along with her use of humour, and the tongue in cheek juxtaposition of the very polite *please fill them out properly* with a strong expletive all reflect her strong orientation to maintaining team morale, and a desire to balance her management responsibilities with her continued acceptance as one of the team.

After this briefing, GT reported that she still wasn't confident that the team were really taking the problem seriously. However, this perception is not borne out by an analysis of several interactions which took place on the packing line later the same morning. HW, LF and SW are working near one another, and they have a series of discussions as they work to try and sort out exactly what they need to do about the packing codes, which is turning out to be a far from straightforward issue. In excerpt 5 we see LF trying to show SW what to do, and using the strategy of invoking GT's authority when he disagrees, at which point SW backs down.

- (5) LF: but now they try to take out the zero no more zeros  
 SW: no 'cause the zero doesn't mean anything the zero is a nothing that there is the main one four five six seven but the zero zero is only just something in front of it ...  
 LF: but why do you think you would say that when ginette was explaining that this morning

SW: oh i wasn't over here i only just just realised this morning when you come over you see

In excerpt 6, HW points out that they have to copy down the codes that actually appear on the boxes of product coming off the line. When SW complains, HW invokes the spectre of being shown up in front of the rest of the team at the next briefing to gain SW's compliance. This strategy is successful in gaining SW's compliance in an amicable way.

(6) HW: so you can't copy that you gotta copy what you got in the box 'cause you get your box off the line right so everything in the box is what you're going to write down there

SW: okay (11) shit

HW: hey hey next week next week at er the team brief me and you are gonna get singled out next time you're told to do something do it

SW: good on ya good on ya helena

These excerpts provide a taste of how the messages that GT was trying to convey during the briefing continue to be negotiated throughout the morning. Clearly, these workers have understood that there is a problem that they need to take seriously, even if they have not understood all the details of what needs to be done, and they are actively working on resolving it in a collaborative fashion during their successive interactions. The affective messages that we saw in GT's monologue have also been taken up, and are being renegotiated in various ways, especially the notion that if individuals do not make an effort to sort this problem out, then they are letting the whole team down. This team ethic is very strong, and is a powerful strategy for gaining compliance.

Finally, in excerpt 7, we see GT in action again, this time talking one-to-one with SW, who is clearly still a little confused.

(7) GT: what do we have on here

SW: four five six seven

GT: why have you put four five six seven

SW: 'cause i was taking it off that one but gonna take it off that one

GT: you don't take it off that one

SW: no er well yeah i did i know i was my-that was my mistake

GT: yeah

SW: yeah

GT: no the way you did it this morning is good that's what we're supposed to do (9) see how important important the checks a- are you know if you do them properly

SW: well i yeah i'm usually pretty good on on that sort of thing now so-

GT: yeah

SW: if you go by the book you can't go wrong

GT: that's right just remember that when you're doing the check list you put down what YOU find not what it should be so you're

checking against what it should be if it don't match then there's something wrong

What is interesting here is the way in which GT uses quite different strategies to the ones she used when she was talking to the whole team. She is using a range of facilitative, 'coaching' strategies to help SW see for himself what he has been doing wrong, and what is right, and she gets him to the point where he acknowledges how important it is to pay attention to detail and do the checks. She asks questions, provides supportive feedback, echoes and expands on SW's contributions, and then finally sums up what they have agreed. It has taken all morning, but at least for this worker, the problem has finally been resolved. The point is that this outcome was not achieved in a single interaction or using one type of discourse strategy. It took a whole series of related interactions in different settings with different interlocutors using a range of direct and indirect strategies, and invoking affective as well as referential meaning, plus a great deal of active involvement from Sam himself, for 'the message' to finally get 'across'.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This preliminary analysis of factory communication indicates that an accurate description of effective workplace communication cannot focus simply on single interactions and the accurate transmission of information. Instead, we need to recognise the complexity of the ways in which shared understandings are actually built up through a series of related interactions. Future analyses of data from this project will take these factors into account in order to describe the discourse strategies used in factory talk more thoroughly, to evaluate their effectiveness in terms of the prevention and repair of miscommunication of various sorts, and to diagnose the underlying causes of communicative breakdown. This study has provided a promising starting point for working towards the main objective of this action research project, which is to create a practical model and set of tools for evaluating and developing communication in self-managing factory teams.

#### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the management of Lever Rexona and the members of the 'Power Rangers' team, who between them made it possible to collect the data used for this study. Thanks are also due to the rest of the Language in the Workplace Project team, especially Megan Ingle who did much of the fieldwork, and Bernadette Vine and Louise Burns who processed and transcribed much of the pilot data. The Language in the Workplace Project is funded by the Foundation for Research, Science and Technology.

#### **References**

Coupland, N., Giles, H. and Wiemann, J.M. (Eds) 1991. Talk as "problem" and communication as "miscommunication": an integrative analysis. In

- Coupland, N. Giles, H. and Wiemann, J.M. (Eds) *Miscommunication and Problematic Talk*. London: Sage, 1-17.
- Drew, P. and Heritage, J. 1992. Analyzing talk at work: an introduction. In Drew, P. and Heritage, J. (eds.). *Talk at Work. Interaction in Institutional Settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 3-65.
- Gumperz, J. 1992. Interviewing in intercultural situations. In Drew, P. and Heritage, J. (eds) *Talk at Work. Interaction in Institutional Settings* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 302-327.
- Holmes, J. Stubbe, M. and Vine, B (1999). Constructing professional identity: "Doing power" in policy units. To appear in Sarangi, S. and Roberts, C. (eds.) *Talk, Work and Institutional Order. Discourse in Medical, Mediation and Management Settings*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Stubbe, M. 1998 Researching language in the workplace: a participatory model. Paper presented at the 1998 Annual Conference of the Australian Linguistic Society (ALS), Emmanuel College, the University of Queensland, 3-5 July. Published electronically in *ALS98 Papers in Proceedings*: <http://www.cltr.uq.edu.au/als98/>.
- Stubbe, M. and Vine, B. (In press). Swings and roundabouts: getting things done at work. To appear in *Te Reo: Journal of the Linguistic Society of New Zealand* Volume 41.