Workplace meetings and the silencing of women: An investigation of women and men’s different communication styles and how these influence perceptions of leadership capability within Australian organisations

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Statement of Sources

Unless otherwise indicated, the work presented in this thesis is the result of my original research. It has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Margaret Byrne
Preface

Several years ago, at the outset of the research journey leading to this thesis, I received a phone call from the human resources director of a large, well-known organisation. She explained that she had been given my name as someone who was a good speaker on diversity issues. They were organising a two day strategic planning conference for sixty senior managers, the leaders of the organisation, and a presentation from me would, they felt, be a suitable after lunch event. I accepted and gave a sketch of what I would like to cover. I explained that I was currently researching what goes on in the talk between women and men in professional meetings and how this contributes to so few women moving from the middle to the top of Australian organisations.

There was a brief silence at the other end of the phone and then the HR director said, “I don’t think you quite understand, Margaret. These are senior people. Most of them are men, so the topic of gender won’t be relevant. Anyway, for them ‘diversity’ is about managing the workforce in the most effective way. It isn’t a leadership issue, as such. But, in about three months, we’ve got an event for our Women’s Network. We’d like to support them in becoming more assertive. I think they’d be keen to hear what you have to say.”

This conversation contains much that can serve as a useful preface for my thesis. It illustrates, for instance, that even women can feel that only women have a gender! However, more disturbingly, it suggests that those at the top of organisations, with the power to change them, may be more interested in conserving their position, while encouraging those at the bottom to learn how they can best assimilate into the prevailing norms. In this way, current relationships and inequities are sustained through their daily enactment.

When I began work on this research, I had two objectives in mind. The first was to design an investigation to throw light on that promotion bottle-neck which exists in most Australian workplaces. Diversity is increasingly recruited and moves upwards from the bottom to the middle but then stops. Further promotion, into the ranks of the senior executive, is far less certain, irrespective of talent. Why this happens is a complex
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phenomenon but I wanted to explore the part which relates to what happens in those regular meetings which constitute the lifeblood of any organisation today.

The second objective was to design some useful training resources around the themes of the research, constructed in light of the findings and based solidly on them. For these reasons, my research journey has evolved along two intersecting but distinct tracks: the formal requirements of a PhD and the wish to contribute, however minimally, towards positive change, through an after-life of research products.

In balancing these two objectives, I should also acknowledge that my own and my subjects’ agendas were largely one and the same. As a woman who has been involved from 1968 onwards in actively progressing women’s interests, including those of migrant women, both politically and socially I related to my subjects. As a mother of two talented young professional women for whom I passionately want things to be different, I engaged wholeheartedly in this investigation. In my instance, researcher and researched shared a significant aspect of our social identities.

In this context, certain premises informed the investigation. Perhaps the most important is that I do not believe we can ignore the broader social realities when examining what goes on in organisations. Men and women are, unfortunately, not ‘different but equal’. Gender and power interact in complex ways such that our notions of leadership come drenched in gender.

I wanted to shift the arguments about men, women, difference and bias by making available a body of authentic and engaging evidence. Consequently, this research is constructed around the large corpus of data which I collected. This archive now amounts to more than 70 hours of footage, filmed to international broadcast standards, almost totally transcribed, with all legal consents obtained to ensure it is accessible. This way, I felt, those I wished to influence in Australian organisations would not need to trust my judgement or listen to my perspective: they could make up their own minds about what really goes on in meetings, while I stood back.

I have attempted to make a practical contribution towards dismantling the subtle structures that sustain bias and nourish that most intractable of human tendencies which
causes us to judge difference as inferiority. If organisations are serious about wanting to capitalise on the promised benefits of diversity, then it makes no sense to constrain everyone to behave in the same way. This would seem to defeat the purpose. It has the effect of suffocating the innovation available to us from the different perspectives of personality, gender and culture – the three variables research suggests are the most significant in everyday life. The data collected for this study demonstrate that in Australia we still have a considerable way to go before difference is not only recruited into an organisation but is celebrated, not silenced, for its distinctive voice.
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John Twitchin, Director of the Centre for Intercultural Development, London, and Dr Paul Ruefli are two friends who gave me their time generously when I needed to talk through ways of getting around the various obstacles that inevitably beset projects of this type.

My warm thanks go to all those who generously allowed themselves to be filmed and shared their experience of organisational life with me.

I would like to thank my daughters, Clare and Ruth, whose talents and ambitions have inspired this work.

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Finally, I’d like to acknowledge my father, Charles Byrne (July 1918 – July 2004) who encouraged me to persist in this endeavour and who would have enjoyed reading my thesis.
Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to investigate how the distribution and function of talk in workplace meetings contribute to differential outcomes for women and men in Australian organisations. Despite thirty years of initiatives, including the legislative framework of Equal Employment Opportunity, long-standing patterns of discrimination and difference persist, with relatively few women managing to achieve a senior executive role. This study explores how these patterns of male advantage and female disadvantage are reproduced in workplace meetings through the different communication styles which tend to be employed by men and women, and through the way that these different performances are judged.

The data comprise approximately seventy hours of professional meetings filmed to international broadcast standards, with two cameras in most cases. Participants in the research are 158 male and 104 female, middle to senior managers within 18 organisations. Some of the 55 meetings filmed also include team members who were not born in Australia, thus providing the opportunity to explore the way culture as a variable may co-vary with gender, reflecting the complexity encountered in today’s multicultural workplace.

The large size of the corpus and the high quality of the filmed data enable a thorough linguistic analysis to be undertaken. Workplace meetings emerge as a critical site where leadership potential is identified yet, it is argued, men and women do not meet as equals when they meet at work. Their conversations are played out against a backdrop of structured inequality, with the power differences and bias encountered in the broader society found to be mirrored in workplace life.

The thesis includes an evaluation of the current literature on women and men’s communication styles, and the findings of the present study are discussed in terms of the extent to which they correlate with or diverge from existing views. The implications for social change are explored and recommendations provided for the consideration of organisations seeking to broaden the pool of talent from which future leaders are drawn.
Note
[This formal thesis is submitted for examination, along with four other items provided solely for the interest of examiners, since reference is made to these in the thesis. The other items are two films and two training handbooks made by the author from the research data, in order to render the findings easily accessible to men and women in Australian organisations committed to change. Copies of these films and handbooks have been included with the thesis in a package sent to each examiner.]
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Chapter 1
Introduction: meetings as a critical site where leadership potential is identified

Overview of chapter
This chapter seeks to establish the significance of workplace meetings as a critical site where leadership potential is exhibited and evaluated. Yet, it will be argued, men and women do not meet on equal terms when they meet at work. Interactions in meetings are played out against a backdrop of structured inequality, with power differences in society being reflected in workplace life. Australia’s record in these matters is especially troubling. Certain obstacles to women’s progress that reflect particular features of the Australian ethos and culture are outlined. It is suggested that women’s acculturation into masculine behavioral norms further complicates research in this area. The chapter closes by arguing that there is a lack of good quality data on workplace talk generally and Australian workplace talk in particular. The present study, therefore, extends our understanding of why greater numbers of women are not moving into senior roles within Australian organisations and, it is hoped, makes a positive contribution towards improving the quality of workplace interactions.

Workplace meetings as a critical site
The culture of an organisation is determined not just by its formal design but also by a multitude of informal processes through which gender relations are constructed and continually reproduced (Halford and Leonard, 2001). If we want to understand an organisation fully, then we must examine ‘how things are done round here’ (Deal and Kennedy, 1982). As Pemberton (1995) has noted, organisations are like tribes. They have belief systems about the rightness of certain social arrangements and certain ways of behaving which motivate their actions. Among the most significant of these is language and how it is used to represent or situate people, confirming power relations between groups, such as men and women. In other words, there is an intimate connection between language and power (Fairclough, 1989).

In this context, workplace meetings can be viewed as what I term a ‘critical site’ where individuals must collaborate to solve problems and make decisions but, at a deeper level of significance, where they must also compete for visibility. It is here that leadership potential is identified and developed or, alternatively, dismissed. In effect, a meeting is a
“status arena” (Jay, 1999: 30) in that it is frequently the only time staff members are given the opportunity to test out their relative standing. An employee may show talent and expertise in those parts of their work which they carry out alone, but if they cannot get the floor and hold it in a meeting, they will not be regarded as demonstrating ‘leadership capacity’. As Holmes comments, “…talking time in public or formal contexts is generally socially valued time, with the potential to increase the speaker’s standing in the eyes of others. Public talking time increases a person’s visibility” (Holmes, 1992:146). Therefore, how well an individual handles interactions in meetings functions to show case their leadership ability.

The main problem people face in meetings is how to get a turn to speak in such a way that they are considered neither abrasive nor passive. If they interrupt others and dominate the talk, they risk alienating their colleagues. On the other hand, if they say little or nothing, then they may come across as ‘unassertive’ and find themselves rated poorly against standard performance appraisal criteria such as ‘initiative’ and ‘suitability for promotion’. They may even see another person take or be given credit for work that was partly theirs and see prestigious projects pass them by (Tannen, 1994: 6).

A further stress can be the paradox inherent in the prevailing notion of teamwork. Employees are expected to demonstrate collaborative and cooperative skills but, at the same time, organisations assume some degree of competition and most performance management systems still focus on criteria related to individual, not group, achievement. Consequently, although employees may be members of one or more teams and must be able to work well together, they tend to be rewarded on the basis of their individual performance. There can be a tension inherent in managing these opposing goals (Byrne, 2000). The balance is often an uneasy one, adding to the pressure to get a turn to speak and be seen to hold the floor, especially when more senior people are present.

Talk in meetings can be thought of as a “turn-taking game” (Tannen, 1986:vii), where the rules are rarely discussed yet the penalties for breaking them can be severe. When team members are questioned about their meeting norms, I have found no other topic arouses such strong feeling and as much misunderstanding as that of turn-taking. However, until the issue and its significance are drawn to people’s attention, they find it hard to articulate the exact nature of the problem they are experiencing. Turn-taking
rules are so embedded in meeting procedures that most management books and workplace training courses on the topic do not even mention them. Cameron (1995) notes the same problem,

It is this question of getting access to the floor, and more specifically the phenomenon of ‘silencing’, that women have tended to comment on when I have asked them, individually and in groups, what linguistic problems they encounter in public domains. It is clearly something women are consciously aware of; it is always the first thing they mention, and often it is the only thing (Cameron, 1995:201).

Who speaks and what impression they create in the public and formal context of workplace meetings matter since women and men now work side by side in the majority of professional fields. 43 per cent of the Australian workforce is now female and more than half of all graduates in subjects such as business and law are women (Poole and Langan-Fox, 1997: 7). In fact, women are now represented in most employment sectors, including non-traditional fields such as engineering and science. Moreover, the process of restructuring has led most Australian organisations to view teams as their basic organisational building block from the factory floor to the boardroom (Byrne, 1997). Indeed, very few employees today do not belong to a team and, as already noted, many belong to more than one.

Teamwork translates in practice to meetings where individuals must work effectively with those who, by reason of gender, personality or cultural background, are significantly different from themselves. This tends to be experienced as challenging if not problematic. Each team member may try to do what they intuitively feel is appropriate to the situation. But, because they may be drawing on different assumptions and expectations they can end up feeling at cross-purposes. These diverging interpretive frames can produce frustration, resentment and negative evaluations of both character and ability. The result is that women (and others seen as not ‘fitting in’) can become marginalised within the organisational culture, with harmful consequences for their careers.

In some instances, these problems are acknowledged and organisations implement training in teamwork and meeting techniques, as a remedy. However, the approaches taken in these interventions tend not to provide the skills required, since they generally
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reflect strategies developed for the homogeneous groups that were the norm in many workplaces of the past but are no longer relevant. Management techniques developed for workforces which were relatively homogeneous in gender, ethnicity and profession have been shown not to achieve positive results with the diversity of today’s workforce and the complexity of today’s business environment (Maznevski, 1994).

For those seeking to establish responsiveness to diversity in workplaces, it is an uncomfortable truth that many people feel more at ease working alongside those who are similar to themselves. Indeed, some US studies indicate that white males may initially reduce their level of commitment when they find themselves obliged to operate in a diverse setting (Tsui et al, 1992). Inevitably, individuals bring to teamwork different, often divergent, norms and aspirations, together with any stereotypical assumptions they may have collected in previous situations, including those unrelated to the workplace. In her study of teamwork in Australian organisations, Sinclair (1995: 56) points out somewhat pessimistically, “There is little evidence that teams can dissolve deeply-felt differences or the prejudices that can sometimes flow from those differences”.

However, there are also studies which demonstrate that successfully-run diverse teams bring economic benefits to an organisation, as well as being fulfilling experiences for team members themselves. In particular, such teams have been shown to outperform homogeneous teams on complex problem-solving tasks (Cox and Blake, 1991; Shaw, 1983). But the keys to unlocking this potential are relevant skills, the time to develop them and the motivation to deploy them (Watson et al, 1993; Anderson, 1983). Without skills and understanding, it seems that the much-publicised government rhetoric of ‘productive diversity’ may remain an ideal, with disparate styles and fundamental inequalities being the more typical reality.

There is an urgent need for research projects which will examine the obstacles to be overcome if diverse team are to fulfill their promise. Yet this research must also be grounded in current workplace realities, if it is to be viewed as both credible and relevant by organisations themselves.
A context of ‘structured inequality’ – evidence of the problem

Holmes reminds us that “Most interaction problems (such as the unequal distribution of talk in public contexts) are the result of structured inequality in our society” (Holmes, 1992:143). Therefore, urging people to be more tolerant of each other and to view their differences as opportunities for personal and professional growth (as do the value statements of most Australian organisations) misses the point which, as Holmes succinctly puts it, is that “…in the real world power is the issue.” Research must take into account this backdrop of ‘structured inequality’.

An overview of recently-published reports on the nature and extent of male-female inequality in the workplace provides an appropriate context within which the problem addressed in this thesis can be located and understood. For example, a recent study (Brouard et al, 2004) shows that, while women make up 45 per cent of the Australian workforce, they still earn just 84 cents for every dollar earned by their male counterparts. However, when over-award and overtime payments are included, the figure drops to 79 per cent and, if part-time and casual rates are also included, the figure drops still further to 66 per cent. These figures tend to surprise people, particularly when they are reminded that the doctrine of ‘equal pay for equal work’ was legally accepted in 1969 and, in 1972, the concept of ‘equal pay for work of equal value’ was added. Even when other variables, such as differences in qualifications and parenting responsibilities, are removed, the same pay disparity persists. For instance, drawing on tables from the 2001 census, Megalogenis (2003) examines the situation of young lawyers, aged 25-34 years and without children. He found that, while females outnumber males 53 per cent to 47 per cent, there was a 12 per cent pay gap in the men’s favour. Moreover, the gap was greater for those working 36 hours or more a week.

Research in Australia by Burton (1991, 1997a) and Hunter (1999) underlines the differential evaluation of the skills which are associated with women. For instance, female ‘trimmers’ in the seafood industry who attempted to have their jobs re-categorised as ‘general hands’ (and so attract a higher hourly pay rate) were informed that, since the dexterity required in the trimmer’s job was ‘natural’ for a woman, it could not be classified as a skill (Hunter, 1999).
UK research conducted by the Cabinet Office Women’s Unit (Rake, Davies and Joshi, 2000) used a simulation model to plot the influence of a range of variables on women’s lifetime earnings. They compared men and equivalently skilled, childless women and found that women earn up to $1.25 million less in lifetime earnings due to the hourly pay gap between men and women. They also examined the impact of other variables such as educational attainment, number and timing of children and events such as early parenthood and divorce. The study comments that, “For the first time, this research quantifies those parts of the lifetime earnings gaps of equally-skilled men and women due to being female (the gender gap) and to motherhood (the mother gap)” (Rake et al, 2000:3).

A recent International Labour Organisation study (ILO, 2001) examines the causes of these widespread disparities suffered by women. The studies concluded that female-dominated fields were undervalued and underpaid. In addition, most training and other diversity initiatives have been shown to be ineffective in dealing with issues of subtle bias. The peak EEO body in the US, Catalyst, published findings from research conducted in 1999 which showed that the barriers to advancement cited by women in the US are the same as those detailed in Australian research, for instance by Sinclair (1998). They include lack of an influential mentor, lack of access to networks, lack of role models, difficulty in achieving visibility within the organisation and inadequate training of managers in practical strategies for minimising bias. As noted earlier, achieving visibility is closely related to the ability to get and hold the floor in meetings and, therefore, contributes to women’s marginalisation when their leadership potential is minimised.

Another area of disparity continues to be childcare and housework. Even when husbands and wives both hold jobs, it is still women who shoulder most of the responsibility in this area (Berk, 1985 and Megalogenis, 2003). The best available statistics demonstrate that, while men’s contribution to household tasks has increased, women still provide over 70 per cent of the total time given to unpaid work (Bittman and Lovejoy, 1993). As Wajcman comments in her study of gender in organisational life, the finding “goes some way to explaining the continuing imbalance of women and men in senior management positions. Indeed, it leads us to ask how any women are able to be top managers at all” (Wajcman, 1999:135).
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Several studies (for example, Still, 1993 and Sinclair, 1998) have pointed out that Australia has lower percentages of women in management than North America or Northern Europe and representation is improving only very slowly. A 1994 study using Bureau of Statistics data found that 23 percent of managers were women, but this drops dramatically in the transition from middle to senior ranks. Women hold around 3 per cent of top management jobs, although the number is higher in the public sector. The study concluded that, at this rate of progress, equality in management would take 177 years to achieve (Neill, 1997). The Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills (Karpin, 1995) found evidence of prejudiced attitudes towards women in the workplace and concluded that indirect discrimination is rife in both the public and private sectors. It argued that Australian organisations “have yet to adopt best practice approaches to progressing women into more senior positions” (Karpin, 1995:243).

Brouard (2004) and her colleagues at the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) detail the findings of an Australian Women in Leadership Census undertaken by the Agency. From an equal opportunity point of view, the figures make dismal reading. Out of every ten senior executives in the corporate sector, at least nine are likely to be male. Only 8.4 per cent of board members are female and, in fact, 49.1 per cent of Australian top 200 companies have no women executive managers at all. Women hold only 4.7 per cent of executive line roles. Bureau of Statistics figures (ABS, 2001) support the EOWA findings, showing that men outnumber women in management and administrative jobs by more than three to one.

Such studies underline that, unless the general circumstances of women in Australian organisations are significantly improved, we will not succeed in broadening the pool from which future leaders are selected and developed. Research which contributes to our understanding of this problem may help us to design useful interventions to promote women’s progress. An investigation of the bottleneck which seems to exist as Australian women attempt to move upwards came to this conclusion, “The small number of women in management positions is not indicative of a general lack of qualified women in the workforce, but rather the inability of organisations to remove the structural and cultural barriers that block women’s progress” (Smith and Hutchinson, 1995:2).
Some ‘peculiarly Australian obstacles’ to women’s progress

The statistics demonstrate that leadership in Australian organisations has remained largely homogeneous, in spite of our extraordinarily diverse, multicultural society creating pressure for change. For example, the recently published International Labour Organisation report, ‘Breaking Through the Glass Ceiling’ (ILO, 2001), points out that Australian women hold a meagre 1% of executive positions in private companies. This compares with 4 per cent in the UK and 2 per cent in Japan. The evidence suggests “some peculiarly Australian obstacles to the diversification of leadership” (Sinclair 1998: 8).

In 1994, for example, Sinclair published a study of Australian organisational culture based on in-depth interviews with eleven chief executives of large companies. The study offers a glimpse into a world which has traditionally excluded women and which, as Sinclair shows, to a large extent continues to resist the changes needed if women are to work side by side with men on the basis of their expertise and experience.

It is perhaps unsurprising that male norms tend to prevail in the Australian workplace. Sinclair (1994, 1998) has explored the masculine character of Australian organisational culture. She argues that typical images of leadership, for example, are of the solitary but successful male who displays a stoic toughness as he battles circumstances, able to count on his mates, with whom his connection is defined partly by the exclusion of women. Moreover, this masculine culture is not simply a characteristic of the corporate sector. A recent ‘State of the Service’ report (Public Service and Merit Protection Commission, 2001) reveals the disturbing news that the Australian Public Service currently has fewer women and people from Non-English speaking backgrounds in senior positions than five years ago. The situation appears to be becoming worse not better. Senior women in the Australian Public Service, interviewed as part of a recent inquiry into this problem (Burgess, 2001: 17), cited the following contributing factors: the “aggressive workplace culture”, the “sense of a boys’ club” and the “prevailing macho style and harsh head-kicking atmosphere.” All of this, it was felt, disadvantaged women but, perhaps even more significantly, it discouraged them.

There are historical reasons why Australia has developed a particularly masculine-oriented workplace culture. In his history of the Australian language, Baker (1970) points
out that for more than half a century after first settlement, Australia was almost entirely a masculine society, as far as Europeans were concerned. As late as 1840, the proportion of European males to females was two to one. The masculine bias of the traditional Australian ethos can be seen as a function of such conditions and of the fact that many men were dependent on other men for companionship and human contact.

From his perspective as a sociologist, Hofstede (1998) views Australia as what he terms a ‘masculine society’. He argues that men in societies such as Australia are expected to be tough, assertive, decisive and ambitious, while women are viewed as more caring and relationship-centred. He contrasts this binary opposition of social roles with a relatively ‘feminine’ country, such as Denmark, where it is more acceptable for both women and men to be tender, concerned with relationships and, as managers, to value intuition and consensus. Masculine cultures, in Hofstede’s view, tend to privilege traditional masculine values of competition and toughness in organisational life.

In a similar vein, Gibson’s (1995) cross-cultural study of leadership and organisational norms places Australia at the more overtly masculine end of the continuum. She concludes that, as a result of the peculiarities of its history, it may be that cultural values such as individualism and masculinity have become deeply engrained in the society, in its practices and preferences, and hence are translated into organisational life.

In her examination of Australian language and slang, Wierzbicka (1997) exposes the culture of toughness and resilience which underpin peculiarly Australian terms such as ‘whinge’ and ‘sook’ and the rich set of speech act verbs, for example, ‘to dob in’. In particular, she explores the meaning and use of the word ‘mate’ and shows its relation to the uniquely Australian value placed on toughness and male solidarity. She concludes that ‘mate’ is different from “probably any other concept embodied in a noun in any other language…Concepts of this kind are very complex and…each of them reflects one particular perspective on human relations due to special historic and cultural sets of circumstances” (Wierzbicka, 1997:103).

The need for Australian data
For these reasons, there is a need for research which focuses on the Australian workplace and the collection of specifically Australian data. However, there are only a
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limited number of Australian studies concerned with gender differentiated language and these have not focused on the workplace (see for example Thwaite, 1993 and Bramley, 1997) but on student-student interactions, televised political debates or social talk. A survey of spoken discourse studies in Australia (Clyne and Slade, 1994) cited only one related to gender: Thwaite’s (1993) quantitative analysis of the social talk of twenty Sydney university students organised into same-sex pairs.

In fact, most of the relevant workplace studies have been conducted in North America, the United Kingdom or, more recently, New Zealand and, therefore, do not entirely reflect conditions here. For example, an article in a widely-read management journal (Fox, 2001) explored the out-of-date, authoritarian management style still favoured in most Australian organisations. In contrast with the consultative, involving and motivating approach advocated by the majority of recent courses and texts, the article notes that very few Australian companies have chosen to embrace these more open approaches. Indeed, the traditional ‘command and control’ style widely regarded as a recipe for failure, was found to be still the norm here. A survey of Australian chief executives showed that they had generally been selected because the board was focused on short term performance and looked for the same kinds of personalities and features they always have. The article identified that preference as being for “a particular breed of authoritarian, white, Anglo-Saxon men” (Fox, 2001:21).

This feature of Australian organisations has particular relevance in the light of the research conducted by Rosener and others (Rosener, 1990, 1995; Pringle, 1996) which suggests that women fare better in organisations which are less hierarchical and more consultative. These studies also indicate that, when free to choose, women tend to adopt this more open style when placed in leadership roles themselves. Taken together, these studies suggest that there are indeed some particular Australian barriers facing women and that these dictate the need for research with a focus on the Australian workplace.

Moreover, any research concerning itself with gender relations in the workplace must take into account the social and historical backdrop of inequality, difference and discrimination outlined above. We cannot approach a consideration of how men and women use language in the workplace assuming that they interact as equals.
Workplace Meetings and the Silencing of Women

There is a complex relationship between differences in women and men’s use of language, on the one hand, and their different status, on the other, not only within a particular organisation but in society generally. In her review of the research in this area, Aries concludes that gender differences cannot be understood without putting them in the context of gender inequalities in society (Aries, 1996: 21). The present study acknowledges this context and seeks to further explore Holmes’ comment that “Most cross-gender communication problems in public contexts are women’s problems, because the interaction rules in such situations are men’s rules” (Holmes, 1992:143). It will be argued that, while these problems belong only in part to women (since men have also contributed to their creation and maintenance), they are indeed perceived to be “women’s problems”.

The acculturation of women in the workplace
A further complicating factor for research in this area is that, in order to succeed, many women, men who are regarded as ‘different’ and people from culturally diverse backgrounds, may choose to assimilate into an inimical organisational culture in order to get on (Sinclair and Wilson, 2002). Sinclair (1998) found that by the time women achieve positions of formal power, many seem to have acquired similar influencing strategies to their male colleagues, not because these approaches mirrored their own preferences, but as a result of acculturation. Wajcman’s (1999) findings also show that the similarities between the women and men in her sample far outweighed any differences between them. She concludes, “This commonality comes about because women’s presence in the world of men is conditional on them being willing to modify their behaviour to become more like men” (Wajcman: 1999:8). A particular challenge for research in this areas is to take into account these complexities which can influence the communicative style women choose to adopt in certain workplace settings, so that underlying differences become masked.

Both behaviour which corresponds to the stereotypical view of female managers (as nurturing and consultative), and behaviour which runs counter to this, need to be examined within the framework of structured inequality. For example, Wyatt (1988) has shown that the leadership style frequently attributed to women may be a function of the situation in which they find themselves. She explored leadership in a group of women
who, although competent and clever, did not have the chance to develop their own careers. They were members of a voluntary, community-based weavers’ guild. Her finding was that the women who were identified and accepted as leaders emphasised caring and connection and were uncomfortable with power and hierarchy.

Instead of concluding from this finding that women are different from men, preferring connection over competition, Wyatt argues that the female leaders’ behaviour was constrained by their lack of power. Kanter (1977) draws the same conclusion: women who feel themselves outside the power structure of an organisation focus on creating a supportive group. In an interview, Wajcman (Byrne, 2000a) expressed a similar view, “I think if you are more powerful, you have the ability to use a range of styles and, if you are less powerful, you have a smaller repertoire of styles. You may be forced to be more consultative because you actually have less power” (Byrne 2000a:13).

Perceptions can colour our view of others and their view of us, with the result that we find ourselves treated in ways that bear little relation to who we are as individuals and more to do with the assumptions others have of us, based on the group to which they see us belonging. We then attempt to mediate any potential negative consequences of these perceptions by managing the impression we make. Those in a less powerful position are likely to be more sensitive to the impression they convey since they have more to lose if a negative stereotype is activated and more to gain if this can be avoided.

A study of 1,000 managers attending a conference in the US demonstrates this effect (Trompenaars, 1998). When asked about the appropriateness of showing emotion in the workplace, 54 per cent of the men felt this was a good thing to do. They would be displaying their sensitivity and approachability. Their view was that a good manager should be ‘in touch with himself’. It would give the right impression.

However, only 35 per cent of the female managers agreed. The study concludes that, for the female managers to succeed, they needed to avoid the stereotype of ‘hysterical woman’. It would give the wrong impression. The threat of this damaging stereotype functioned to bring them into line (Trompenaars, 1998).
Inequality is, therefore, a thread woven into the fabric of organisational culture, influencing how linguistic strategies and behavioural choices are appraised and rewarded. Coates (1998:229) emphasises that when women interact with other women they interact with equals, while, when they interact with men, they are relating to members of the dominant group. For this reason, analysis of mixed gender interaction has to be conducted within a framework which acknowledges dominance as a relevant category. Although such a framework applies to all talk between men and women, it has particular significance where the workplace is concerned, since, as shown earlier, senior positions tend to be held by men: in the workplace, male dominance is not an abstract notion but the daily fact of organisational life.

**The current lack of data on workplace talk**

Despite the significance to organisations and to individuals of workplace talk, relatively little research has been conducted in this area. Most studies exploring women and men’s talk have been conducted in social situations. For example, a recently published collection of language and gender studies (Coates, 1998) written over the last thirty years and selected because they are regarded as ‘key papers’, included only five on the topic of workplace talk, out of a total of thirty-two papers. Even those studies concerned with talk in formal contexts have largely concerned themselves with more specialised settings such as doctor-patient interactions (West, 1990; Ainsworth-Vaughn, 1992), the courtroom (O’Barr and Atkins, 1980) research teams (Nelson, 1988), academic discussions (Eakins and Eakins, 1976; Edelsky, 1981) or public seminars (Holmes, 1992).

These are not typical workplaces and extrapolating findings from such studies to organisations generally may be unwise. For example, the research on gender and language in academic settings, such as faculty meetings, needs to be viewed as closely tied to the specific culture of universities. In this setting, while many meetings may concern administrative or management issues, it is not managerial capacity which tends to influence career progression so much as the quality of the individual’s research and the number of their publications. Indeed, studies have shown that, in the academic sphere, leadership potential is not assessed in the way it occurs in other types of organisations (Brunnetto, 2000). In effect, the performance criteria are weighted differently with professional excellence and achievement being given much more
emphasis than management skills. Therefore, the context in which the talk occurred
must be taken into account when that talk is analysed. Interactants must agree, at least
in part, on the nature of the speech activity in which they are engaged in order to jointly
establish expectations about likely goals and what might constitute appropriate
behaviour. Interpretive frames vary according to the specific conversational context
(Gumperz, 1982a).

The specific context which is the focus of the present study is the regular meetings
taking place within organisations in both the public and private sector. We have fewer
data currently available concerning this activity type. Meetings can be thought of as the
lifeblood of an organisation. In an important sense, it can be argued that organisations
are talked into being during meetings (Bargiela and Chiappini, 1997: 4) and are
maintained by means of this talk. Yet studies have shown that managers themselves
tend to over-estimate the time they spend reading, writing and thinking and under-
estimate the time they spend in meetings. For example, Schwartzman (1986) states that
while managers said they spent 49 per cent of their time in meetings, the actual figure
based on the researcher’s observation was more than 69 per cent. Meetings, whether
formal or informal, planned or unplanned, are at the heart of organisational functioning.
Schwartzman concludes that meetings must be granted status as a key form of face-to-
face interaction and as such should properly become the object of our research
(Schwartzman, 1986: 249).

Salient features of workplace meetings as an activity type include the competitive
environment (even when this is overlaid with an uneasy veneer of collaborative
teamwork); the constraints of hierarchy and status differences; the pressure to perform
and the threat of repercussions for poor performance; the continuity of most
relationships and the need to get along with colleagues even when rapport is minimal.

Much research in this area does not reflect these key features. Some studies purport to
examine workplace talk and reach conclusions about gender and language but the
design of the research prevents such studies from being genuinely useful. For example,
in a study conducted by Wiley and Woolley (1988), their generalisations about the
corporate world turn out to be based on the reactions of 107 first year university students
to two versions of a hypothetical case study concerning a workplace. Data of this type cannot be regarded as illuminating workplace realities.

Even studies frequently cited on this topic often have methodological drawbacks limiting their relevance. One such study is that of Schick Case (1988) which claims to describe ‘managerial meetings’. However, the participants were in fact five women and five men attending a training course. They were away from their regular workplaces, were of comparable age, status, class and ethnicity, were not discussing real issues, only training exercises, and were not being judged on their performance. There was nothing at stake. These features prevent studies of this type from being classified as descriptive of ‘workplace meetings’, as such meetings are typically constructed.

Research in this area may also suffer from a lack of openness about the data collected. Admittedly, this is an almost inevitable hurdle that researchers must overcome, since there are legal as well as ethical issues where workplace data collection is concerned. It is obviously much simpler to organise a study in a social setting among friends than it is to acquire all the levels of permission necessary when entering a workplace. For this reason, workplace data are often disguised: we know little about them and cannot evaluate for ourselves their quality or relevance.

Tannen’s (1994) study of workplace talk (described in ‘Talking From 9 To 5’) is an example of this type. She identifies several data sources which constitute the basis of her work: her own observations in a number of workplaces, noted down as well as she could at the time; some tape-recorded conversations; several interviews based around relatively superficial questions, such as ‘what are your impressions of the people you work with?’; her own experiences and those of her friends, family members, students and even, she reveals, those of chance acquaintances (Tannen, 1994: 17). All this is worryingly vague and lowers the credibility of her examples and the persuasiveness of her conclusions.

Some studies of gender differentiated language and the role this plays in the difficulties women face in their career progression are not, in fact, based on any new corpus of data but focus instead on an interpretation or critique of existing studies conducted by other researchers. An example in this category is the commentary by Coates (1995) on
studies completed earlier by other researchers. This covers the talk of nurse-practitioners (Fisher, 1991), doctors and patients (West, 1990) and university academics (Nelson, 1988). Coates chooses to focus on questions and directives on the grounds that, “the chief goal of discourse in the public domain is the efficient exchange of information” (Coates 1995:22). This generalisation is not supported by reference to any corpus of data where talk in the public domain was analysed according to its function. While Coates’ view may hold in the specific and limited setting of, for instance, doctor and patient, it does not apply to the workplace generally.

Extensive study has already been conducted on the kinds of talk in which people typically engage within the Australian professional workplace (Willing, 1992). Information exchange is neither the predominant activity type nor the most demanding. In his sample of 30 hours of recorded talk, Willing found that the consistent thread running through the working day of Australian professionals was that the nature of their work consisted predominantly of problem-solving (Willing, 1992:4). The extensive corpus of data collected for the present study (more than 70 hours) supports Willing’s finding. When people meet at work, they tend to do so in order to solve problems and make decisions. While information exchange does occur, it is not usually the primary purpose of the meeting and frequently functions simply as one phase within the overall activity of problem-solving. For instance, it may be observed during an initial sharing of views on the nature of the problem facing the team. This means that the purpose of the talk and the skills required to manage it are more complex and more demanding than those implied in Coates’ ‘information exchange’. The present study examines these more complex settings.

In this context, the Language in the Workplace Project conducted by Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand offers some interesting parallels. This study involves a large team of more than thirteen researchers who have collected examples of both effective communication and problematic discourse. With these resources, the team has been able to amass more than five hundred hours of talk at work, with many interactions being short, informal exchanges starting at twenty seconds in duration (Holmes, 2001; Holmes and Stubbes, 2003).
However, while the New Zealand research provides additional data as support for the present study, its application to the Australian context has some limitations when the problem of women’s progress is the focus. In their attempts to move through organisational ranks to more senior roles, New Zealand women appear to face more porous barriers. There is evidence both of more success on the part of women and more acceptance of that success. At the time of writing this thesis, in New Zealand the five ‘constitutional’ jobs are all held by women: the Governor General, Dame Silvia Cartwright; the Prime Minister, Helen Clark; the Opposition Leader and first female Prime Minister, Jenny Shipley; the Attorney General, Margaret Wilson; and the Chief Justice, Sian Elias. In Parliament, 30 per cent of the Members are women; of the thirty-eight most senior public servants, nine are women; the chief executives of three leading companies are women. The very public role occupied by successful women in New Zealand is evidence of a different cultural base within organisations and public life generally. In a recent television documentary (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2001) which compared the situation of women in the two countries, Helen Clark was interviewed and asked to reflect on the differences, drawing on her extensive experience of working closely with Australian counterparts. She commented, “The culture in Australia is fundamentally more masculine and more intractable.” For these reasons, findings from one setting with its particular parameters must be applied to another with some care.

The relatively small amount of research attention on workplace talk does not mean that the problems facing individuals and organisations have gone unrecognised. In fact, when we turn to the quite different, non-academic, genre of popular management literature, self-help books, professional journal articles and workplace training courses, we find it is a dynamic and ever-increasing field. Each year, there are numerous ‘how to’ books about meetings, teamwork, assertiveness and visibility published. Most of these are addressed specifically to women. Most, it must be said, are ill-informed, based on spurious research and offer simplistic or vague advice. Yet they exist and are widely taken up because the need is experienced as pressing. Cameron, who also surveyed women concerning the most widely used of these publications, has this to say on the specific issue of getting a turn to speak in workplace meetings, “It [popular management material] is of limited use to women in addressing the one problem whose existence they appear to acknowledge unequivocally” (Cameron, 1995:202).
Conclusion

The aim of the current study is to address just that problem by examining what happens in Australian workplace meetings. Who speaks, for how long and to what effect? The relevance of status and the ‘structured inequality’ between men and women in society generally are acknowledged, together with the complex accommodations that individual women may choose to make in order to gain acceptance. Meetings are a ‘critical site’ where people compete for visibility and where leadership potential is continuously evaluated. It is hoped that this study will add to our understanding of gender and language through an analysis of naturally-occurring data, collected in a broad range of Australian workplaces. As a practical result of this analysis, interventions can be designed which may assist in broadening the pool of talent from which future leaders are drawn. We find ourselves at a particular point in history where there is increasing pressure from women and from many men to change the way we construct leadership in Australian organisations. Examining precisely what happens in workplace meetings will contribute to this objective.
Chapter 2
Relevant background: women, men and language

Complexity of gender as a variable
Any discussion of how women and men interact in workplace meetings is fraught with complexity. The presumed biological, psychological and linguistic differences between men and women have been the subject of academic pronouncement, media speculation and popular literature for the last thirty years, since Robin Lakoff (1973) published her influential first paper on women’s use of language. Thorne and Henley (1975) characterised this intense interest in gender and language as “spreading like wildflowers” (Thorne and Henley, 1975:30). Today, perhaps a more accurate analogy would be to some type of invasive and possibly noxious weed. Both the popular press and scholarly journals abound with reports of studies on the differences between men and women. In few other fields do people assume expert status so readily.

Gender, it seems, is a fundamental and universal method both of defining ourselves and characterising others. It touches perhaps more closely than anything else, our sense of identity and our beliefs about who we are (Byrne, 1998). Research suggests that every society and all cultures hold stereotypes about what is normal or appropriate for each sex and individuals are frequently judged against these norms (Hofstede, 1998; Scollon and Scollon, 1995; Brislin, 1993). It is hardly surprising that people bring their sense of a gendered identity with them to workplace interactions. Consciously and unconsciously, this influences their communicative behaviour and how they evaluate their colleagues. It is through communication that a society’s gender system is accomplished (Rakow, 1986: 11).

Overview of chapter
The purpose of this chapter is to bring together the ideas and controversies which have dominated the research literature and influenced both the design of the current study and the framework employed in analysing the data collected. In addition, by providing an overview and an assessment of the main theories within existing research, I hope to establish a context to help identify the particular contribution of the present study.
Workplace Meetings and the Silencing of Women

This critical account of the literature draws on research conducted in a range of distinct but related fields, such as social psychology, sociolinguistics, conversational analysis and organisational behaviour. Each of these disciplines offers useful insights and, taken together, they provide a more richly-textured view of gender and language than that available to researchers limiting themselves to a single field. An examination of workplace talk between men and women necessarily involves building certain interdisciplinary bridges.

Some recent approaches to the ‘nature-nurture’ debate are included, although the present study is concerned with interactions between adults, not children. The aim is to indicate the source of current trends in the research which have affected the hypotheses held about men, women and language use. For this reason, gender-related expectations and social role theories are also mentioned. Although the principal focus of the chapter is on the various sociolinguistic theories relevant to the current research topic, influential sociolinguists themselves (for example, Tannen) readily enlist research from anthropology, psychology and even physiology to support their positions. Therefore, it is relevant at least to sketch in these areas. This provides a useful reference point for the evaluation of the various sociolinguistic theories towards the end of the chapter.

Besides the ‘nature-nurture’ debate, the other central controversy in the field is that between ‘dominance’ and ‘difference’ positions. Put simply, research with a dominance perspective explains any observed differences between women and men’s communicative styles as outcomes of historical inequalities in power and status. In contrast, research with a difference perspective views the same phenomena as a consequence of the different sub-cultures into which women and men have been socialised. It will be argued that, while both approaches make important contributions to our understanding of workplace talk, neither can stand alone as an explanatory frame.

An overview of the more popular literature in the management field is included in this chapter. The aim is to evaluate the books and training resources which Australian organisations are currently using to assist them in human resource management and the career development of their employees. Since the subjects of the current study are women and men in the workplace, it is relevant to consider the theories about gender and language which are readily available to them and may influence the assumptions...
and expectations they tend to bring to workplace meetings. In later chapters, it will be shown that many of the subjects in the present study were indeed familiar with this popular literature and drew on it to help interpret their own experiences.

The final section of this chapter examines how current thinking about men, women and language has been distorted and selectively applied by human resource practitioners and executives within Australian organisations. The prevailing approach is one of ‘managing diversity’ where each individual employee is seen as different. This replaces the earlier notion of Equal Opportunity target groups whose disadvantage must be remedied. It will be argued that the difference model, with its avoidance of the vexed questions of power and dominance, has been employed to support approaches to the management of people which sidestep inequality and focus not only on individual differences but individual solutions to particular problems. The effect of this focus is to sanitise the issue of women’s lack of career progression and lend support to an underlying policy where women, people from other cultural backgrounds and other employees seen as different, must assimilate or leave. It seems the latter remedy is, in fact, being selected by an increasing number of women. For instance, Australian Bureau of Statistics figures indicate that the number of male small business operators has grown by 3 per cent in recent years but, during the same period, the growth of small businesses run by women has been almost 10 per cent (ABS, 2001).

Throughout this discussion, the distinctions typically drawn in the literature between the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are employed. ‘Sex’ is taken to be determined by genetic codes which program the biological features of each individual. In contrast, ‘gender’ is used to refer to the social beliefs and attitudes which specify what sex is to mean in a particular culture, at a particular point in its social history. Wood (1993:156) describes gender as “the cultural meaning of sex.” In this context, Rakow’s (1986) definition is one of the most relevant. “Gender…is usefully conceptualised as a culturally constructed organization of biology and social life into particular ways of doing, thinking and experiencing the world” (Rakow, 1986:21). ‘Sex’, therefore, describes the biological and ‘gender’ the social. The use of these terms has assisted investigation of the two dimensions relevant to studies in this area: differences which are viewed as inherently belonging to an individual and those which arise from the effects of socialisation and, therefore, involve a group.
The influence of sex and childhood socialisation

Each person’s sex is determined by the particular set of genes inherited from their parents. With the exception of identical twins, everyone inherits a unique combination of genes which ensures great diversity among people. In females, the two chromosomes that make up the twenty-third pair are both X chromosomes. Males have one X and one Y chromosome. For the first six weeks after conception, however, there is no structural difference between genetically male and genetically female embryos. Both males and females, for instance, have two ridges of tissue, called gonadal ridges, in the uro-genital region and these give no clue as to sex.

The genes inherited at the moment of conception determine whether the sex glands which develop will be male testes or female ovaries. The male hormones produced by the male gonads, principally testosterone, determine maleness. Femaleness depends not on the secretion of hormones by the ovaries but on the absence of testosterone. As researchers have commented, it appears as if nature requires something to be added if the embryo is to succeed in becoming male (Halpern, 1986).

It is significant that the influence of testosterone is not limited to the formation of male genitalia but extends to changes in brain activity as well. Its presence suppresses certain behaviours of the pituitary gland which would otherwise establish the cyclical pattern of hormone secretion characteristic of women and which will later control the menstrual cycle (Wilson, George and Griffin, 1981).

It is still uncertain how testosterone creates differences in brain activity, but data from animal research suggest it may affect the development of neural pathways in particular ways (Toran-Allerand, 1984). Sensitivity to male rather than female hormones seems to have a striking effect on behaviour. For instance, when pregnant monkeys were injected with testosterone, their female offspring behaved like male monkeys. They threatened other monkeys, displayed aggressive behaviour and engaged in rough-and-tumble play (Young, Goy and Phoenix, 1964).

Testosterone in humans is also associated with more assertive behaviours, higher rank and good spatial orientation (Mazur and Lamb, 1980). In contrast, the female hormone,
estrogen, is associated with nurturing behaviour in many mammalian species, including humans. Estrogen has also been linked to linguistic facility since this hormone appears to trigger the building of more connections between nerve cells and so facilitates the flow of information among neurons (Woolley et al, 1990). Findings such as these suggest that hormones appear to be the architect of certain sex differences in the brain.

These references to a select number of studies are not intended to be a proper treatment of a field outside the scope of the current study but simply to indicate the complexity of the nature-nurture debate and the backdrop of research which has influenced theorists concerned with gender and language. For example, thirty years ago the inclination of many sociologists was to down-play the essential biological division of men and women, beyond acknowledging obvious physical characteristics. Behavioural differences were judged to be the result of socialisation, rather than a reflection of any innate distinctions between men and women (Rosenberg, 1982). However, that is not the generally-accepted view today. Recent research has employed sophisticated technology to explore the effect on behaviour of hormonal and other genetic features (Cole and Cole, 1993). Moreover, the extensive studies of identical twins, reared separately from birth, confirm that inherited factors play a role in the development of temperament. A review of the findings in this area concluded that biology and culture interact in ways which complicate attempts to separate the influences of nature and nurture in human development, including in the behaviours associated with men and those associated with women (Cole and Cole, 1993).

The implications of such findings are that, even if it were possible to minimise the effects of socialisation, boys and girls (and, by extrapolation, men and women) might still behave differently in some respects, with boys appearing more competitive and girls more nurturing. A 1990 study validates this hypothesis. Weisner and Wilson-Mitchell (1990) studied families who had made a deliberate choice to promote sex-egalitarianism in the rearing of their small children. When they compared the sex-typed preferences for friends, toys and modes of play with small children in such families and those children whose families adhered to existing cultural norms, they found only scattered differences of no statistical relevance.
As part of the current study, interviews were conducted with a small group of men and women undergoing gender re-assignation. The first stage of this process involves hormone injections only: testosterone for women who have chosen to be reassigned as men, and a combination of female hormones for men who have elected to live as women. The women in this group commented on the powerful effect on their reactions and behaviour of the testosterone injections. They found themselves less risk-averse, more competitive and significantly more assertive. Indeed, the medical counsel they each received was to avoid social settings for some months as far as possible, since their unexpectedly assertive reaction to, for example, perceived slights might lead to anti-social behaviour on their part.

However significant the influence of our genetic inheritance and the hormones bathing our brain at key stages of its development, these do not exist in isolation but within a particular environment. It is only through interactions with the environment that organisms develop.

Social-learning theorists believe that all behaviour is shaped by the environment. According to this view, children see that male and female behaviours are not the same. This observation leads them to form hypotheses about the behaviours appropriate to each sex. In addition, they may find that boys and girls are rewarded by adults for different kinds of behaviour, so they choose the behaviours which will attract rewards: inevitably these behaviours are sex-typed (Perry and Bussey, 1984).

Kohlberg (1966) takes a related but slightly different view, claiming that the crucial factor in sex-role identification is children’s developing capacity to categorise themselves and others as either ‘girls’ or ‘boys’. According to Kohlberg, this typically begins in the third year and, once formed, a small child’s conception of their sex is maintained, regardless of environment. This theory has been taken further by Bem (1981) who suggests that children in every society learn their culture’s gender schemas and the attributes and behaviours appropriate to each sex, by observing and participating in interactions.

Researchers have observed the play of small children in order to collect evidence of their sex-stereotyped talk and behaviour. For example, Maccoby (1980), Lever (1978) and Goodwin (1980), found that girls tend to play in pairs or small groups made up of
children of a similar age. Their play is centred around cooperative games where distinctions between participants are made on the basis of intimacy, not power. Lever (1976) noted a paradoxical feature of this play: everyone is supposed to be equal and to get on with each other in a companionable way but the truth is sometimes different. Disagreements do occur. She observed that an argument can either cause a friendship group to break up altogether or the conflict may be dealt with through talk.

The findings from such studies suggest that girls learn to relate to others through talk. They give each other support, let others speak and acknowledge their contributions in order to create a context of closeness and equality. ‘Bossiness’ or ‘meanness’ to others is not seen as appropriate behaviour (Goodwin, 1980). Therefore, girls learn to influence others, to criticise and argue in indirect ways, such as framing an issue in terms of the situation or the group as a whole. All this requires a degree of finesse and subtlety in decoding non-verbal clues and cues. More recent research by Cook-Gumperz (1982) supports these findings. In her study of girls’ play, Cook-Gumperz found that, although the girls envisaged themselves as powerful, their talk was focused on organising their lives around nurturing others.

In contrast, it has been observed that boys’ play tends to socialise them into hierarchies where relative status is key. For example, Savin-Williams (1976) studied dominance patterns among boys attending a camp during their summer holidays. He found that status tended to fluctuate so that, over a period of time, most boys experienced situations in which they were openly judged to be inferior. The boys had to acquire sufficient resilience to withstand this. High status boys in a particular activity gave direct orders and used name-calling and threats to assert their position. Goodwin (1980) found similar patterns among the Philadelphia boys in her study.

These researchers note particular ways boys tend to use language. The first related to asserting dominance. Successful boys in the group were not bullying leaders but were liked and respected. They used words to fend off a challenger or make their status within the hierarchy clear but they tended to accomplish these objectives without humiliating or brow-beating the other boys (Goodwin, 1980). The second related to the way boys shared anecdotes and stories.
Sacks (1974) notices that in storytelling situations there seemed to be skills demanded of both the teller and his audience. The teller had to learn to deal with challenge, mockery and little in the way of positive encouragement. For their part, audience members were expected to assert their identity by interjecting their own opinions and comments. Sacks concluded that boys prioritise the ability to manage and hold an audience which is not obviously supportive. Such findings are relevant when male meeting behaviour is examined, in particular, attitudes towards interruptions and strategies for managing these.

Taken together, these studies indicate that, to some extent at least, boys and girls (already different at birth) are socialised into different worlds. It appears that from the range of linguistic options available to them, girls tend choose cooperative forms while boys select strategies which encode competition. Gendered identity is, therefore, taught by adults, practised by children and reinforced in interactions with other children. In these ways, children gradually learn what is appropriate in a given situation and this knowledge is gendered. As Goodwin (1980:173) states, “different approaches of girls and boys to talk in similar activities are not only indicative but also constitutive of characteristically different social organizations.”

The importance of gender-related expectations

These ‘different social organisations’ observed in studies of childhood mirror the traditional division of labour in Western societies which has been shown to shape our expectations of the behaviours we associate with women and men (Eagly, 1987). Social role theory, as developed by Alice Eagly, argues that the distribution of men and women into different roles, both in family life and in society generally, leads to expectations that men and women have different attributes suited to the roles they tend to occupy.

Historically, men dealt with the external world and managed the broader society. In contrast, women’s tasks related to nurturing relationships within the family. For this reason, Eagly claims, women are more easily accepted in roles we connect with caring for and promoting the well-being of others, such as nurse, teacher or personal assistant but face resistance when they try to move into positions of power, where they may be required to make the types of decisions traditionally made by men.
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The division of labour sets up the expectation that women are caring, nurturing, warm and good at feelings. Men, on the other hand, are seen as practical, protective, rational and good at thinking. Eagly’s last point is that the roles assigned to men have historically carried more power and status than those assigned to women. Social role theory has particular relevance for the Australian workplace since studies (for example Karpin, 1995; Smith and Hutchinson, 1995) have shown that Australia has one of the most sexually-demarcated economies among the countries which belong to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). In other words, the traditional distinctions about what constitutes ‘men’s work’ and what is seen as ‘women’s work’ have tended to persist in Australia and these affect workplace attitudes.

The distribution of men and women into these quite separate roles leads to an emphasis on acquiring different skills and competencies. These, in turn, influence gender differences in communication and behaviour. In this way, expectations become stereotypes which establish guidelines for what is regarded as appropriate to each sex. A stereotype is no more than a set of attributes ascribed to a group and regarded as characterising its individual members for the sole reason that they belong to that group. Where sex stereotypes are concerned, these are attributes which are attached to individual men and women by virtue of their sex.

For instance, the behavioural norm that men should be dominant and women should be nurturing does not allow women to be too dominant or men too nurturing. Some variation is permitted but only to a certain point. Mapstone (1991 and 1998) studied how these social divisions affect the different interpretations men and women construct to help them understand the arguments they have with others in their professional and personal lives. She comments, “This Division of Labour is widely held to be based upon innate, immutable differences between the sexes, and thus any person who tries to act outside these expectations is liable to be judged aberrant” (Mapstone 1998:34).

This negative judgement can even degenerate into discriminatory behaviour. Individuals who do not conform to gender role norms can experience the sometimes considerable power wielded by those who support the norms and attempt to enforce their views through reward and punishment.
A case before the NSW Equal Opportunity Tribunal (1994) illustrates what can happen when an individual is judged as violating the behavioural norms assigned to each sex. John Daniels was an electrician with the Hunter Water Board. Influenced by his new girlfriend, a hairdresser, he adopted what was described as a ‘trendy’ haircut, and had an earring inserted in his left ear-lobe. He also took up aerobics, jazz ballet, drama classes and part-time modelling. It was at this point that his co-workers began to harass him. They started to call him ‘weirdo’ and to allege that he must be gay. When he removed from the wall a poster of a naked woman in a demeaning pose, the frequency of the derogatory comments about his sexuality increased. He was called ‘gayboy’, ‘gay bar freak’, ‘poof’ and ‘poofter’. When Daniels complained to his supervisor, it was suggested he do an assertiveness course and, on another occasion, that he read an article on how to handle stress and take a course of vitamin B tablets. Daniels finally left the Hunter Water Board and successfully pursued a discrimination claim.

There is no doubt that fulfilling the gender-related expectations others may have of us promotes social acceptance. Those who deviate from these expectations “pay a price in dislike, disapproval and harassment” (Aries, 1996:202).

The gender of the person with whom we are interacting shapes the way we respond to them and, most significantly, the way we evaluate them. Research suggests that even when men and women employ the same communicative style, they will still be perceived differently, with women generally seen as less effective and less competent. For example, Graddol and Swan (1989) have shown that the same linguistic strategy is assigned a different meaning, depending on whether it is employed by a man or a woman. When women used the assertive strategies associated with men, they were not found to increase their social status as men do. In addition, when men used the more tentative strategies associated with women, they were not judged as uncertain.

A study by Bradley (1981) came to a similar conclusion: employing a tentative style caused more problems for women than for men, since it activated already-existing stereotypes of women as tentative and hence weak. Bradley organised her subjects into twenty-four groups with a trained male confederate in half the groups and a trained female confederate in the other half. The confederates were instructed to argue for a position different from the views of other group members. In half the groups,
confederates supported their arguments with statistics, facts and evidence. In the other groups, confederates made assertions without any kind of proof. A further division of confederates was made by half of them, in each condition, using tag questions, disclaimers and other strategies which tend to soften or mitigate an opinion.

Bradley found that male confederates who did not support their arguments in any way were judged as more influential and intelligent than females speaking in that style. Similarly, female confederates who used tag questions and other ways of softening their point were seen as less intelligent and less dynamic than males speaking the same way. The study suggests that irrespective of how men and women may behave, stereotypical judgments of their performance in a meeting can be triggered, based solely on their gender.

In Mapstone’s (1996 and 1998) study of argument styles mentioned earlier, she found that, although a cool, detached rationality would seem to be called for in workplace meetings, women who adopt this debating style were frequently viewed as aggressive and hostile by male colleagues, including by those who themselves employed this style. Some studies indicate that, where stereotyping others is concerned, the sex of the respondent makes no difference. Heilman (1983 and 1997) has found that men and women alike subscribe to sex stereotypic conceptions, with negative consequences for women. She concludes that, if effective interventions are to be designed in order to dismantle the barriers impeding women’s career progression, then we must take into account the psychological dynamics of stereotyping which contribute to detrimental inferences about women managers’ ability (Heilman, 1997:886).

A particular type of meeting examined in the current study is that between a team member and their supervisor in order to appraise recent performance and determine the most appropriate next steps to develop the team member’s career. Meetings of this kind have been shown to be particularly susceptible to the influence of stereotyping (Burton, 1987). Dobbins and his colleagues (1988) conducted a study to explore how this occurs. They assessed a large group of subjects for their stereotypical thinking about women before asking them to evaluate a candidate for a possible promotion on the basis of written information outlining their experience and expertise. The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) was used to gauge their attitudes in relation to men and women.
He hypothesised that the schemata held by his subjects, linking men and women with stereotypical behaviours and characteristics, would influence their appraisal. Specifically, Dobbins posed the question: would subjects prone to more stereotypical thinking evaluate men and women differently, even when their performance was identical?

The BSRI, the tool used in the study, was developed by asking people to rate the most desirable characteristics for a man and for a woman. The inventory produced by this large piece of research contains twenty items rated more desirable in a man, twenty more desirable in a women and twenty regarded as neutral. Bem (1981) found that some individuals are ‘sex-typed’. They conceive of ‘maleness’ and ‘femaleness’ as mutually exclusive categories, possess a rich cluster of associations related to these categories and then use this network of associations to evaluate and organise information. In contrast, individuals who are not ‘sex-typed’ do not use biological sex to organise and store information. In other words, people vary in their readiness to search for and assimilate information in gender-related terms.

The masculine items in the BSRI include ‘acts like a leader’ and ‘has leadership abilities’, whereas the feminine items refer to more passive, yielding and nurturing qualities. As was predicted, the findings demonstrated that raters with traditional stereotypes of women associated femaleness with ineffectiveness in the workplace. They tended overly to react to, encode, store and recall all instances of ineffective female performance in the information provided to them about the candidates. Their biased information-processing strategies interfered with accurate, objective evaluation. In contrast, raters who did not hold traditional stereotypes about men and women, were not overly-inclined to observe and recall examples of poor performance. They tended to recall examples of both successful and less successful performance. As a result, they were able to arrive at a more accurate and balanced evaluation of the candidates (Dobbins et al, 1988).

Studies such as this indicate the disadvantage women suffer in workplace meetings where they may be appraised by managers with traditional views of women, their characteristics and the roles appropriate to them. Other studies, such as that by Heilman (1984), demonstrate that this effect is exacerbated when the performance measures are poorly defined and the information collected is inadequate.
Burton (1987) has shown that stereotypical thinking about men and women is not only a filter through which individual supervisors assess women’s performance, it is also embedded within organisational arrangements. She asserts that the opportunity to accumulate merit and the attribution of merit both appear to be structured along gender lines in Australian organisations. Expectations of men and women are different and identical behaviours are assessed differently at many points within the system. Burton concludes,

> Current practices do not wholly rest on individual merit or competence but on a range of perceptions, evaluations and decisions already based on a set of arrangements and understanding which provide women with less access to opportunities than men (Burton, 1987:431).

To sum up, we are continuously aware of the sex of participants in workplace interactions and this knowledge triggers expectations based on the collection of attributes and characteristics we have come to associate with each gender. Our perceptions are not always accurate or objective: we unconsciously bend them to fit our expectations. Stereotypes are also prescriptive and influence how men and women believe they ought to behave. We can feel pressure to conform to society’s ideas about what behaviour is appropriate to our gender. Lastly, these factors can affect how linguistic competence is judged. Women’s communicative style can be negatively evaluated, even when the strategy they have selected is the same as that of their male colleagues. Such findings have significant implications for the topic of the current research and will be drawn on in the analysis of the data collected.

**The dominance perspective**

As already noted, the gender-related social roles into which boys and girls are socialised are not delineated in a neutral way. Attributes and behaviours associated with men tend to have higher status so that gender and power become inter-twined. A significant debate in the literature has focussed on whether the linguistic features some researchers have identified as being typical of women’s speech are, in fact, simply functions of their lack of power. This discussion has particular relevance to studies, such as the current one, which are concerned with workplace meetings, since team members
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frequently occupy positions at different levels within the organisation’s hierarchy. Status is, therefore, a variable that may co-vary with gender to influence outcomes.

The approach to language and gender which stresses a dominance perspective was popularised by Robin Lakoff (1975) in her book *Language and Woman’s Place*. Lakoff’s work has been cited by almost every study of sex differences in language over the last twenty-five years. It is still influential today within the assertiveness training industry, since this industry focuses on women’s speaking style as a deficit model which needs to be remedied. In addition, Bucholtz and Hall (1995) report that, in coaching men whose gender has been reassigned from male to female, trainers and their clients are enthusiastic consumers of Lakoff, in an effort to acquire an appropriately feminine style.

When we consider the pervasive influence of Lakoff’s views, it is perhaps surprising to note that her work is not based on any systematic collection of a corpus of data which she then analyses. Lakoff herself is quite open about this methodological deficiency. She explains, “The data on which I am basing my claims have been gathered mainly by introspection: I have examined my own speech and that of my acquaintances, and have used my own intuition in analysing it” (Lakoff, 1975:4). She justifies this approach by asserting that, since data have to be elicited from someone, she is as good as source of data as anyone else.

Lakoff’s position is that, through the process of socialisation, girls learn a particular communicative style which prevents them from speaking precisely or forcefully: linguistic effectiveness is traded for femininity and social acceptance. This has significant consequences. “The acquisition of this special style of speech will later be an excuse others use to keep her in a demeaning position, to refuse to take her seriously as a human being” (Lakoff, 1975:5). There is no innate, genetic inferiority where women are concerned. They simply hold low status and experience social pressure to talk in a ladylike fashion. Inequalities in society, Lakoff claims, are reflected in language.

She enumerates the linguistic features which she sees as implicated. These include tag questions, hedges, super-polite and hyper-correct forms, rising intonation patterns and empty adjectives, such as ‘adorable’ or ‘divine’. She regards the effect of this style as negative and describes it as coming across to others as tentative, deferential, uncertain.
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and lacking in authority. Lakoff also claims that women lack the sense of humour vital in establishing good social relations: “It is axiomatic in middle-class American society that, first, women can’t tell jokes – they are bound to ruin the punchline, they mix up the order of things and so on. Moreover, they don’t ‘get’ jokes. In short, women have no sense of humour” (Lakoff, 1975:56).

Women face a difficult decision. If they refuse to employ this powerless language, they will be ridiculed and subjected to criticism for being unfeminine and ‘unlady-like’. On the other hand, if they do adopt this feminine, powerless style, they will also face ridicule and will be judged as being unable to take part in serious talk and as, in some sense, less than fully human. Lakoff characterises this invidious choice as “to be less than a woman or less than a person” (Lakoff, 1975:6).

Her proposition that women use language differently from men because they have been socialised into a subordinate position paved the way for other researchers to explore this premise. Among these is the work of Zimmerman and West (1975) who examined how individual men use interruption to achieve dominance in a conversation. A later study (West and Zimmerman, 1977) took the issue further. Their finding, that male speakers regularly interrupt female speakers, is compared with a second finding, that adults regularly interrupt children. Therefore, they conclude that these male displays of dominance and female displays of submission show that women, like children, have restricted speaking rights. They categorise such behaviours as ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987) and claim that for men ‘doing gender’ means ‘doing dominance’, while for women it means ‘doing deference’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987:146).

Two other influential studies indicate the prevalence of this perspective. First, Fishman (1978) recorded the conversations of three married couples – all white, middle-class and between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. She found an asymmetrical ‘division of labour’ in their talk. Women were more actively engaged in ensuring the success of an interaction. They used a range of strategies to express interest and encouragement, for example, minimal responses, or supportive feedback (such as, ‘mm’, ‘yeah’ and ‘right’), while men spoke. Fishman noted some additional patterns in her data. For instance, both women and men regarded topics introduced by women as tentative and many of these were quickly dropped. In contrast, when men introduced a topic these were taken
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seriously and tended to be pursued. Women asked questions, filled silences and generally took on what Fishman termed the ‘shitwork’ in the interaction. Yet this work was not seen as what women do, but part of what they are (Fishman, 1978:405).

This notion of women as the conversational ‘shitworkers’ can be compared to the observations of researchers such as Hunter (1999) who have also commented that it is employed to obscure how male-female power relations are maintained. As previously mentioned, Hunter found that the skills women demonstrate in the workplace, are played down by being described as innate expressions of their gender and, therefore, not suitable for classification as skills. She points out that this argument has been put forward in Australian Industrial Relations Tribunals to prevent jobs traditionally done by women from attracting the same hourly rate as equivalent jobs, traditionally done by men. Her conclusion is also similar to Fishman’s in describing such examples as demonstrating “the reality of hierarchy in our daily lives” (Fishman, 1978: 405).

A second influential study was that conducted by O’Barr and Atkins (1980) who examined the language used in courtroom interactions. They found that low status individuals employed features of Lakoff’s ‘women’s language’, irrespective of their gender. Expert witnesses, for instance, whether male or female, possess status in the courtroom and were found to speak assertively. In contrast, low status speakers spoke in the tentative, uncertain manner Lakoff associated with women. They concluded that the term ‘women’s language’ should be more accurately defined as ‘powerless language’: “It could well be that to speak like the powerless is not only typical of women because of the all too frequent powerless social position of many American women, but is also part of the cultural meaning of speaking ‘like a woman’ ” (O’Barr and Atkins, 1980:110).

Discussion of dominance model
The studies outlined above emphasise the role of status, power and dominance in explaining differences in the way men and women interact. However, there are some difficulties with this perspective.

First, it assumes that a linguistic form can be matched to a particular function. A tag question, for instance, ought to convey the same impression of uncertainty across all
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speakers and all situations. Lakoff claims that women use tag questions when expressing their opinions in sentences of the following type, “The way prices are rising is horrendous, isn’t it?” (Lakoff, 1975:16). The effect of giving a personal opinion in this form was, according to Lakoff, to convey uncertainty, self-doubt and lack of conviction. But Holmes (1984) points out that questions like this can also be regarded as cooperative, in that they encourage another person to speak, or they might be employed to soften a critical comment, as in, “Well, that wasn’t the most sensible thing to do, was it?” In addition, Harris (1984) studied courtroom interactions and found that powerful individuals also tended to use tag questions. The effect of constructing a question in this way was to threaten and humiliate the participant with less power. She gives this example of a magistrate confronting a defendant, “You’re not making much effort to pay off these arrears, are you?” (Harris, 1984:20).

In her review of the studies on tag questions, Cameron (1992) points out that far from having one function and one effect, tags change their meaning according to the context in which they are located. They can be used to express tentativeness, concern or even authority, as in the study conducted by Harris.

Linguistic forms in themselves cannot be said to carry a meaning. What gives them a particular meaning is the value assigned to them by a society. If a strategy were intrinsically weak, it would be expected to have that effect in all settings. However, cross-cultural studies show that a way of speaking which is regarded as powerless by one society can be evaluated quite differently in another. Wetzel (1988) examined studies outlining the main features of Japanese communicative style and compared these with features ascribed to women in English-speaking societies. She concluded that much of Japanese behaviour (both male and female) is reminiscent of the style seen as belonging to western women and, therefore, as being powerless language. In Japan, powerful male speakers (as well as female speakers) employ linguistic strategies, such as indirectness, associated with powerlessness among English speakers. Indeed, what is seen as assertive and confident by English speakers is viewed as childish and immature by Japanese and by other Asian cultures (Byrne and FitzGerald, 1996: 22).

Therefore, if dominance were the sole key to understanding differences in talk between men and women, power and status could be expected to have a predictable effect on an
interaction. In other words, it could be predicted that, where women hold positions of power, they would dominate conversations in ways similar to men and also, where men are in subordinate positions, their linguistic strategies would change to reflect this lower status.

Woods (1989) recorded conversations in a workplace between colleagues at various levels of seniority and then investigated who spoke most often and longest. Gender was found to be a more significant predictor of linguistic behaviour than status, with female bosses being regularly interrupted by male subordinates, despite their higher status. West (1984) came to a similar conclusion in her comparison of male and female doctors interacting with patients. Male doctors interrupted their patients far more than the female doctors did and both male and female patients interrupted a female doctor more than they did when their doctor was male. Gender, it seems, has primacy over status.

Taken together, these studies suggest that dominance alone as a way of understanding differences between men and women is somewhat limited. In addition, it cannot explain the differences found in same-sex talk where, in the absence of men and any dominance effect, women still appear to operate differently. It would seem, therefore, that power is not the only factor that differentiates men and women.

The dominance approach also assumes an inflexibility on the part of men and women. It implies that speakers do not accommodate their styles to meet the requirements of different contexts. Yet speakers tend to change register when speaking with children, for instance, and even within the workplace speakers tend to vary their communicative styles to suit what they judge to be the demands of a situation. For example, they take into account the level of familiarity appropriate to employ with different colleagues.

Many researchers have rejected this somewhat rigid view of interaction where women’s language is identified as weak and ineffective. They argue that the model was based on a deficit assumption, with men’s language taken as the norm and women’s as somehow ‘deviant’. Adopting an alternative perspective, some theorists have explored the potential strengths of women’s communicative style and put forward an explanatory framework based on difference, rather than dominance. However, Lakoff’s point that society evaluates men’s speech style as superior to women’s appears to be supported by the
studies discussed above and needs to be considered in the framing of any alternative perspective.

**Women and men as members of two cultures**

One popular approach replaces inequality and dominance as explanations for the different styles employed by women and men, by the notion of cultural variation. Men and women, it is argued, speak in different ways not because women have traditionally been regarded as subordinate but because the two groups hold different sub-cultural norms and values. This, in turn, is explained by the different socialisation patterns of boys and girls throughout childhood. Tannen (1986), a major proponent of this approach, sums up the argument in the following terms:

> Male-female communication is always cross-cultural communication. Culture is simply a network of habits and patterns gleaned from past experience, and women and men have different past experiences. From the time they’re born, they’re treated differently and talk differently as a result. Boys and girls grow up in different worlds, even if they grow up in the same house (Tannen, 1986: 109).

The origin of this ‘two cultures’ model is in the work of the anthropologist John Gumperz (1982) who shows that some of what goes wrong in interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds within a multicultural society can be explained as miscommunication and misunderstanding. Gumperz uses the term ‘conversational inference’ (or implicature) to describe the way in which individuals engage in a continuous process of interpretation as they talk. He argues that, in a fundamental sense, language is always ambiguous and that interactants resolve their uncertainty about each other’s exact meaning by employing a range of contextualisation cues to clarify inference. They then act on the assumption that their inferences are correct unless some new information arises to disprove them. According to Gumperz, the most significant sources of these inferences are the grammatical system of the language being used, cohesive devices (for example, the definite article), prosodic patterning and cognitive schemata (Gumperz, 1982).

The challenge for those engaged in a conversation is to interpret not just the meaning of one particular sentence but the speaker’s overall meaning. People need to constantly check that they are understanding the same thing and in the same way. This process
operates relatively smoothly when interactants share a common culture and life experience. They can generally assume that the other party in the conversation is thinking as they do. However, Gumperz shows that, when individuals are members of different ethnic groups, they can bring quite different expectations and assumptions to a conversation, together with different ways of organising information. They have, in effect, different discourse systems so that clashes at the level of values or style can cause communication to break down. This frequently triggers mutually-held negative evaluations of both character and ability. In this way, even with goodwill and good intentions on both sides, people can find themselves as cross-purposes.

Maltz and Borker (1982) apply Gumperz’ way of thinking about cross-cultural communication to the speech of women and men in the influential paper, *A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication*. The paper is not based on any new data but rather draws on the research already conducted by anthropologists who have examined the way in which boys and girls are socialised into different gender-based roles. Maltz and Borker represent the work of the researchers outlined earlier in this chapter, such as Goodwin (1980), Lever (1976;1978), Sacks (1974) and Savin-Williams (1976). In effect, they re-set the findings described in these studies within Gumperz’ model of how miscommunication occurs in cross-cultural settings.

Maltz and Borker (1982) argue that, through their play, boys learn to assert dominance, attract an audience and hold the floor. In contrast, girls’ play teaches them to focus on creating intimacy, criticising indirectly and interpreting others’ speech with sensitivity. These two approaches constitute, in effect, two cultures and explain why men and women favour different speech strategies. In cross-sex interactions, miscommunication occurs because men and women employ different conversational rules and do not share the same ways of inferring meaning. The gender-specific cultural patterns of childhood carry over into adult talk and help us to understand why problems occur. Maltz and Borker claim that these difficulties are analogous to those identified between people from different cultural backgrounds. They are “two examples of the same larger phenomenon: cultural difference and miscommunication” (Maltz and Border, 1982:196).

As Crawford (1995) noted, this attempt to apply findings from studies of cross-cultural communication to the quite different area of conversation between women and men
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turned out to be much more than an academic footnote to the work of John Gumperz. Many sociolinguists found the approach presented by Maltz and Borker refreshing since it encouraged a consideration of woman’s talk outside the deficit model implied by earlier work, such as Lakoff’s (1975). Moreover, this way of thinking also had great popular appeal and was taken to its logical extreme by Deborah Tannen in a series of books which became international bestsellers: That's Not What I Meant (Tannen, 1986); You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation (Tannen, 1990); and Talking from 9 to 5 (Tannen, 1994).

In each of these books, Tannen argues that boys and girls grow up in different worlds with the result that men and women have different habitual ways of saying what they mean. Conversations between them are like cross-cultural communication. A woman, for example, cannot assume that the man with whom she is interacting means what she would mean if she said the same things in the same way. Men, Tannen believes, are sensitive to the power dynamics of an interaction and so they speak in ways that position themselves as one-up and they resist being put in a one-down position by others. In contrast, women are more sensitive to the rapport dynamic and select ways of speaking that save face for others and encourage relationship. Tannen sees both styles as valid and logical in themselves but points out through vivid anecdotes and observed examples that the style common among women puts them at a disadvantage in the workplace, since it is the male style which prevails in public contexts.

Her recommendation is to develop flexibility based on an appreciation of each other’s styles: “Experience has shown that given the tool of understanding, individuals are able to devise ways of addressing and often solving their problems” (Tannen, 1994:314). In a 1995 Harvard Business Review article, she advocates that, in the light of her work, managers should develop more adaptive and accommodating approaches but, again, exactly what these might be is not specified and how managers (and men) might be motivated to adopt such approaches is not explained. The following section discusses some problems with the ‘difference model’ both in the research literature and in its implications for professional development in the workplace.
The popularity of the difference model in Australia

The difference model as expounded by Tannen has particular significance in relation to the topic of this thesis since it is Tannen’s views, rather than those of other researchers in the field, which have influenced the books, articles and training courses widely taken up by Australian organisations. Many of the subjects of the current study, both male and female, had either read one of Tannen’s best sellers or were familiar with her views at second hand. Sometimes they were even unaware that it was Tannen’s position which had been delivered to them in a training course they had attended.

According to the Canberra city managers of Collins and Dymocks (two of the largest Australian bookshop chains), apart from Deborah Tannen, their most popular books on gender and the workplace over the last two years have been: A Woman’s Guide to Managing Men by Vicky Hibbert and Sue Baker (1995); Women at Work: Strategies for Survival and Success by Anne Dickson (2000); Play Like a Man, Win Like a Woman by Gail Evans (2000); and Gender Games: Doing Business with the Opposite Sex by Candy Tymson (1998). The first two are British, the third is American and the Tymson book is Australian. However, they all share an unquestioning acceptance of the difference model as a framework for examining what happens between women and men in the workplace.

Evans, for example, advises women on how to avoid being shunted into the “pink-collar ghetto” (Evans, 2000:185) of marginalised human resources roles within an organisation. She explains that the central problem women face is that men and women were not born with similar instincts and have not been similarly socialised. We are “inherently different” (Evans, 2000:11). We have learned to play with different sets of rules but the business world is run according to men’s rules so, in order to be effective competitors, women need to become familiar with how the game is played by men. However, that is only half of the challenge. The other half is even more demanding – how to play and win by men’s rules but without threatening men in any way. “We have to find ways to toot our own horns without making ourselves or our associates uncomfortable” (Evans, 2000:77). Some day, Evans reflects, the glass ceiling might no longer exist and the workplace will be different. But, in the meantime, women should adopt her fourteen basic rules for success, behave like their male colleagues, yet be
authentically themselves while making sure they pose no threat to others within the organisation. This should keep them busy.

The two British books adopt a less extreme position but nevertheless it is fundamentally the same one. Dickson reassures us, “Your values aren’t wrong, just different” (Dickson, 2000:141). Hibbert and Baker explain that men are more task orientated and women are more caring; men never share their feelings and women are more open; men pretend to understand and women are not worried about saving face (Hibbert and Baker, 1995:45).

The Tymson (1998) book is described as “a snappy, reader-friendly summary of the latest research findings on the communications gender gap.” Tymson informs us that men use language to preserve their independence and position, while women’s priority is creating connection and intimacy. Her book cites all the main points Tannen (1994) covered in Talking from 9 to 5 and, indeed, two things become clear. First, all the studies mentioned are the same as those to which Tannen refers. Second, the accounts of the studies taken from Tannen have enough inaccuracies to suggest the author has perhaps not read the original papers but has simply transposed the findings as Tannen presents them. For instance, the paper by Maltz and Borker, referred to above, is introduced with a comment on the extensive research the two Americans conducted with small children (Tymson, 1998). However, Maltz and Borker state in the third line of their paper that their analysis is based solely on a review of others’ work. Since this is not quite how it is presented by Tannen, it is easy to see how important points such as this can be overlooked when original sources are not scrutinised.

Tymson points out all the problems women face in the workplace because of their different culture. She explains the rules of the game as played by men but then advises women not to try to be like men because men do not like it. In an interview with Tymson, The Age journalist Karen Kissane (1998), picked up on this lack of practical recommendations and asked her how corporate women should play the game, if, as Tymson asserts, being tough earns dislike and being nice earns contempt. Tymson’s response was significant, “A man needs to feel acknowledged and respected. You get the best response appealing to his abilities and expertise: once that has been established, he will accept your suggestions.” As Kissane somewhat tersely comments, the advice “might well have come from grandma” (Kissane, 1998:20).
Tymson is by no means alone in assuming it is valid to simplify her theme by sticking to Tannen only. *HR Monthly*, the widely read management journal published by the Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI), printed an article by Sally Zanetic and Chris Jeffery (1997) on *Understanding the Other Half of the Workforce*. The article reproduced all Tannen’s (1994) main arguments in *Talking from 9 to 5* and, revealingly, the only references made throughout the article were from Tannen’s book. Zanetic and Jeffery’s article was popular and heralded their own book *Me Jane, You Tarzan* and a series of seminars for business people sponsored by AHRI and Lend Lease. These were conducted in Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane and Hobart during 1997. The seminar program explored how the different communication styles of men and women cause misinterpretations in the workplace and recommended that both sides develop flexibility to capitalise on the strengths of diversity. This is exactly the same argument as that put forward by Tannen.

Why has Tannen’s version of the difference model been so influential within Australian organisations? At a superficial level, it perhaps relates to the persuasiveness of her lively, anecdotal style. Tannen describes a typical incident between men and women in a way that corresponds to our own experience. Her subsequent explanation of why things went wrong strikes us as plausible. Cameron (1997) examines whether we feel we recognise these scenarios because we have actually witnessed them in real life or whether we do no more than readily supply the cultural script that makes them meaningful. She describes an experiment which the American linguist Penelope Eckert employs to confront her students with their tendency to supply a story about men and women which will explain whatever data are presented.

Eckert takes Tannen’s (1990) example of men’s reluctance to ask for directions while driving, which Tannen attributes to men’s greater concern for status. But, as an experiment, Eckert reverses the scenario and tells her students that it is women (not men) who were found to be reluctant to ask for directions while driving. Eckert then asks her students to explain the finding. They have no difficulty in coming up with a different but equally plausible explanation. For example, they may say that women show a typically feminine desire to avoid imposing on others or perhaps that they are wary of talking to strangers.
Cameron’s point is that women and men’s behaviour is invariably read through a set of commonly held views on gender difference. Individuals tend to draw on stereotypical assumptions to explain whatever behaviour they observe. She then goes a step further and claims that this stereotypical thinking “constructs the differentiation, makes it visible as differentiation” (Cameron, 1997:271). In other words, we construct a story about people’s behaviour to make it show certain patterns of gender difference.

Each of us, it seems, by virtue of possessing a gendered identity, is willing, even eager, to describe our favourite theory about men and women and support this with personal experiences packaged as evidence. In Australia, as elsewhere, there appears to be a public enthusiasm for polarised conceptions of gender differences in communication and behaviour, demonstrated by the extraordinary success of books asserting even more extreme positions than Tannen’s, such as Gray’s (1992) *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. He claims, “Not only do men and women communicate differently but they think, feel, perceive, react, respond, love, need and appreciate differently. They almost seem to be from different planets, speaking different languages” (Gray, 1992:5).

**The difference model, equal opportunity and managing diversity**

At a deeper level, the acceptance of the difference model within Australian organisations can be understood in relation to the move away from the policies and programs associated with Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) and towards the current discourse of ‘managing diversity’. Equal Opportunity, with its focus on disadvantaged target groups (such as women and minorities) and its emphasis on confronting discriminatory practices, has become unfashionable in Australia. It is seen as excluding and alienating those who are not members of the target groups (for instance, Anglo-Celtic men) and as implying the kind of ‘affirmative action’ solutions foreign to the Australian ideal of ‘a fair go for all’.

A recent Australian human resource management textbook for both universities and practitioners in the field (Sofo, 2000) is revealing. It argues that EEO had its limitations and was in need of review, “… it has outlived its usefulness, since it had a misplaced focus on a social justice imperative unsuited to a modern climate of change management ... There has also been resistance by some who believe that anti-
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discrimination and EEO principles have no benefits for much of the workforce and that EEO is only a token gesture added on to HRM processes” (Sofo, 2000: 275).

However, the judgement that equal opportunity has “outlived its usefulness” is apparently made by many men and not shared by the same number of women (Still, 1997). It seems also that men and women attribute different causes to women’s low numbers in senior management roles and that these differences help to explain why one group within the workplace might see EEO as outdated, while the other sees it as in need of re-invigoration.

When considering the low number of women in executive roles, Burton claims that men and senior managers tend to look for reasons related to the characteristics of women, their experiences, preferences and life circumstances. In contrast, women are more likely to point to the organisation itself, its policies and practices, as constituting the real barrier to their progression to senior ranks (Burton, 1997a). A national survey of 3,900 employees within three major Australian banks (Still, 1997) found significant differences in perception between women and men. Women felt disadvantaged at all stages of the performance management system, while men felt that women were given equal opportunity to progress and that the organisational culture was supportive of women. A Macquarie University study (Russell and Powell, 1994) of 5,653 employees in ninety workplaces found similar discrepancies. Men were much more likely than women to accept the following propositions: women are too emotional to handle an authority role; women with young children should not be in the workplace; men should be the primary wage earners; women already experience equality. In a paper discussing the above study, one of the researchers concluded that their findings showed, “Senior managers, particularly male managers, do not often recognise that the issue of women getting into management positions is a problem at all” (Russell, 1994: 114).

Considerable evidence shows that women’s perceptions and experiences of organisational life are different from those of many men and, as a result, the solutions they propose tend to differ as well. As Burton (1997a) has pointed out women, as relative newcomers to organisational life, are likely to see their environment more clearly than those who have grown to accept patterns of practice as ‘normal’, although those
patterns are no more than relics of an earlier time when the typical employee and the typical manager were men.

It is a key finding in each of these studies that men generally and senior managers in particular (most of whom are men) tend to believe that equal opportunity has already been achieved. However, women do not appear to share this confidence. This has been named the ‘two cultures of equal opportunity’ (see for example, Mayer and Bacchi, 1996; Burton, 1997 a). A survey of the attitudes within one organisation (Mayer and Bacchi, 1996) showed that men were more likely to endorse a human resources approach based on free competition and merit-based reward. Women, on the other hand, challenged the current application of the merit principle as biased and called for more positive action to redress systemic discrimination. In other words, the men in the study favoured an open ‘managing diversity’ approach while the women believed that equal opportunity initiatives had by no means passed their sell-by date.

However, it tends not to be women with such beliefs who have been influential in determining the approaches to the management of people currently favoured in Australian organisations. EEO units have generally been disbanded and the so-called inclusive policy of managing diversity adopted instead. In such policies, power, inequality and structural bias are set to one side in favour of “the common threads of our humanity” (Sofo, 2000:280). Sofo explains it this way, “A new approach to diversity has been emerging; it does not focus on the economic perspective or on the traditional divide according to legislation … but rather focuses on categorisations of distinct personality dynamics. What is increasingly important is the way individuals are, and the way they function regardless of other distinctions present” (Sofo, 2000:280).

‘Managing diversity’ avoids explicit statements about inequality and the possible tension of different groups operating side by side in the workplace. The uncomfortable realities of difference and prejudice are downplayed and the new focus is on individual empowerment. The politically correct mantra is that each employee is ‘different’ and unique in his or her own way. Equality can best be achieved by treating everyone as an individual. The implication is that no particular group experiences disadvantages which need to be addressed: the institutional setting within which men and women enact their gendered identities is not considered relevant. In other words, gender, as a construct,
somehow “floats free” (Cameron 1997: 31) of the social context within which it is embedded and needs to be understood.

Many previously-centralised human resource functions have been handed over to line managers. One consequence is that people who were promoted into a managerial role because of their technical or professional competence now have significant human resource responsibilities for which they generally have had no training or expertise and very little available to them in the way of specialised support. In fact, many feel conscious that they have not been properly equipped to carry out the range of functions now required of them (Byrne, 1999; Burton, 1997).

A second consequence is that the restructured, reduced and streamlined human resource department finds it difficult to retain an overall grasp of what is happening to various groups within the organisation. Increasingly, the relevant data are simply not kept. As a well-respected human resource director of a major company commented at a conference on multicultural issues held by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) in November 2000, “Even if we had the people to collect the figures, we wouldn’t do it. Our policy is to treat each employee as an individual. Looking at what’s happening to various groups within our organisation would run counter to our ‘managing diversity’ strategy."

The discourse of ‘managing diversity’ is a palatable way of talking about gender differences in organisational life. Everyone is different. What we need to do is understand each other and accept all our differences. This is the rhetoric of ‘managing diversity’ and, despite surface differences, its similarity to Tannen’s approach is significant and helps to explain why certain of her views have been enlisted to provide a legitimising framework.

Both Tannen’s model and the managing diversity approach focus on individual solutions to particular problems, rather than any broad analysis leading to system-based interventions. Both are concerned with presenting no challenge to the current social hierarchy and neither addresses power or discrimination. As Troemel-Ploetz (1991) states in her critique of Tannen’s (1990) You Just Don’t Understand, “That such a deeply reactionary book should appeal to so many readers informs us, disconcerting as it may
be, that what is non-threatening to the status quo sells better than critical analysis” (Troemel-Ploetz, 1991:490).

The inclusive language of the difference model appeals to Australian organisations which, as detailed earlier, are predominantly masculine at senior levels. Here, the equal opportunity model was never provided with the legislative teeth of Affirmative Action, as in the US. Much of the current research data demonstrating the benefits of diversity-friendly organisations are, in fact, US-based. As Sinclair (1998) points out, Australians are less enthusiastic litigators, the fines here are smaller and attract less media attention. Consequently, management and shareholders are less likely to see discrimination as a “barometer of poor corporate performance” (Sinclair, 1998:141). For these reasons, the new rhetoric of managing diversity, based as it is on a cultural approach to gender (and other) differences, diverts attention away from power and prejudice and towards an acceptance of the status quo. Any possible antagonism or hostility is avoided and some simple solutions to be taken up by individuals, not organisations, are promoted (understanding, leading to flexibility). Tannen’s approach, especially in the more simplistic versions found in the courses and books based on her work, fits neatly within popular views about how gender and other differences should be handled within Australian organisations.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, in critical studies produced by academics, there is such a remarkable overlap between management theorists critiquing the managing diversity model and sociolinguists writing about their disagreement with Tannen’s difference model. For example, in a recent article Sinclair (2000), a professor at the Melbourne Business School, discusses the problems she sees with the managing diversity model as a vehicle for teaching gender on MBA courses and in workplace training. She points out that many people with an involvement in EEO “regard managing diversity as a sell-out to management, a management-controlled agenda, determined to sanitise a conflict laden issue and bestow on organisations the appearance of enlightenment without beginning to critique the management framework within which diversity would tidily be subsumed” (Sinclair, 2000:86). Men and women, Sinclair argues, hold different views on the need for change in gender relations in the workplace. While many women express a strong interest in change, men have traditionally preferred
arguments which support patience and time as solutions. This amounts to code for doing nothing, she claims (Sinclair, 1998:131).

There is little doubt that the ways Australian organisations attempt to make sense of the statistics outlining the poor retention and promotion rates of women have become essentially conservative. They tend to propose explanations which endorse the status quo rather than confront it. Moreover, the solutions proposed necessitate changes which involve others, not senior managers and policy makers themselves. They generally include the following: we need more women at lower levels before women will find that, by the sheer force of their numbers, things will shift; women need to demonstrate greater commitment to the need for long hours and travel; women are a risky proposition in comparison with men since, although not all of them get pregnant, no man will (Sinclair, 1998). In this way, aspects of Tannen’s views, as they are popularly understood, have been enlisted to give a veneer of academic respectability to another agenda.

The managing diversity rhetoric, by side-stepping the issue of how power is exercised within the workplace, masks reality and allows organisations to account for women’s lack of success without casting blame anywhere except on women themselves. This goes some way to explaining the continual proliferation of courses and texts aimed at encouraging women to learn the skills needed to fit in without challenging the status quo. One example of this, which will be explored in a later chapter, is the assertiveness training industry, or, as one sociolinguist has termed it ‘verbal hygiene for women’ (Cameron, 1995).

In this context, a recent report by the Australian Institute of Management (AIM, 2001) is relevant. The report explores the barriers facing women in progressing their careers and cites three issues as the cause of the problem: “Lack of negotiation skills, a reluctance by women to put their hand up for the job and trade-offs in favour of lifestyle and family responsibilities.” It is striking that the three barriers identified can all be viewed as the responsibility of women. The report goes on to urge organisations to assist women to overcome these barriers so that their female employees might cease to be “constrained by their own thinking”.

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These examples provide evidence of the conservative backlash currently experienced in Australian public life in a range of areas. More than ten years ago, the Australian sociologist Clare Burton (1987) predicted that the attempt to remove indirectly discriminatory practices in Australian workplaces would generate a new field of protective activity where we would discover that masculine bias, far from disappearing would be mobilised (Burton, 1987:423). As an example noted earlier, the Australian Public Service’s most recent Workplace Diversity Report reveals the dispiriting news that the number of Australian women being promoted to middle and senior management levels is, in fact, decreasing. The representation of people from culturally diverse backgrounds has also declined.

Something of this backlash was demonstrated towards the end of 2000 when The Sydney Morning Herald decided to devote a supplement to ‘Men’s Issues’ and ‘The New Men’s Movement’. John Birmingham, the social commentator and author of a number of books which look at aspects of Australian culture, contributed an analysis. He argued that, as a result of the Women’s Liberation Movement, the Women’s Electoral Lobby and EEO gains over the last thirty years, Australian women have changed in significant ways but men have not made comparable changes. He agrees that most men in today’s workplaces would “cringe at naked discrimination “ (Birmingham: 2000: 47). But he goes on to argue that a key reason why overt discrimination is not only unlawful but also unnecessary is that most men are aware that, within ten years of entering the workforce, female graduates will find their careers “aborted”. Men can afford to be superficially supportive of women’s progress and simply wait. “These men are the creative directors, the chiefs of staff, the internet gurus, political fixers, chief accountants, heads of department … who know that men need only be half as good to fly twice as high. They will never hand over the keys to the kingdom” (Birmingham, 2000: 47).

‘Equality audits’ conducted to gauge attitudes within organisations support Birmingham’s claims. One such study (Maddock and Parkin, 1993), described four common types of male culture found within organisations: the gentleman's club; the barrack yard; the locker room; and the smart macho world. The study found that women’s progression was tolerated in so far as it did not pose a threat to existing patterns. Having numbers of women move from the bottom to the middle was taken as a sign of a progressive organisation but movement beyond that was viewed differently. “While executives are
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looking to promote women to middle management, they still protect their exclusive male culture at more senior levels” (Maddock and Parkin, 1993: 8). A study (Harlan and Weiss, 1981) of male and female managers in two large organisations supports this finding. The first group of women employed confronted some predictable resistance but this diminished as more women were recruited. However, the study found that when women constituted about fifteen per cent of middle management, the resistance began to build up once more. The conclusion was that the number of women now threatened men by increasing the competition faced for senior roles.

It is against this landscape that the subjects of the current research must be viewed. They find themselves at the beginning of a new century still struggling with many of the same issues which preoccupied women in Australian workplaces in the latter half of the previous one. However, the difference is that, instead of the overt sexism and discrimination of the past where, for example, married women were simply sacked, the prejudice has gone underground. As Allport predicted almost fifty years ago, “Defeated intellectually, prejudice lingers emotionally” (Allport, 1954: 311). But it is no less significant for that.

Sociolinguistics, as it is popularly experienced secondhand through the influential works of Lakoff, on the one hand, and Tannen, on the other, has perhaps failed women by not providing an explanation of workplace interactions which takes account of the complex everyday realities of both dominance and difference. Interactions take place within a particular social framework and so to present dominance and difference as opposing constructs is both unhelpful and inappropriate. The following section will explore what a more inclusive model might contribute, one where both dominance and difference are seen as interacting elements within a complex dynamic.

Dominance and difference: conclusion

Studies of same-sex conversations illustrate that women and men do employ some different linguistic patterns in conversation (Treichler and Kramarae, 1983), but to assume that women and men will make no accommodation to each other in mixed-sex conversation is a different point. Tannen’s argument is based on her view (taken from Maltz and Borker and from those social psychologists and anthropologists introduced at the beginning of this chapter) that boys and girls grow up in different worlds. However, it
is evident that boys and girls are not physically separated from each other and that they also interact from birth with members of the opposite sex. As already discussed, there is a complex socialisation process at work where children internalise the behaviours appropriate to their sex, and, to varying degrees, conform to these stereotypes.

This is not the equivalent of, for example, a Somali refugee interacting with an Anglo-Celtic co-worker on a production line in a Melbourne factory. In the latter case, each person can legitimately be seen as ignorant of the other’s interactional norms prior to their encounter. In contrast, people within the same cultural group, despite differences such as gender, generation and personality, do make adjustments to each other and do share certain fundamental assumptions about how their interaction should proceed. In this sense, as Eckert (1989: 251) has noted, gender works in a different way from ethnicity.

Indeed, social psychologists, such as Turner and his colleagues (Turner et al 1987), have shown that the salience of categories individuals create when they interact alters across situations. Gender is not always a salient category and people vary their style across situation types. In fact, women and men belong to many different social categories. Gender, while central to group identity, cannot be seen as a person’s sole reference point. Recent Australian research on self-categorisation suggests that the group aspect of our identity is more varied and more complex than was previously understood (Turner, 2001).

The ‘difference’ approach is also predicated on men and women interacting as “friends and equals” (Maltz and Borker, 1982: 212). Here, the question posed by Uchida is relevant, “When exactly do women and men interact as equals?” (Uchida, 1992: 558). Essentially, the problem is that patterns of dominance and disadvantage, which exist both in society generally and within the Australian workplace, provide an environment of male dominance, irrespective of the good intentions a particular man may bring to an interaction. Both men and women carry into any encounter certain assumptions and expectations derived from childhood. This helps to make sense of those research findings described earlier where female bosses were regularly challenged and interrupted by male subordinates, despite their higher status (Woods, 1989). As
Troemel-Ploetz, in her critique of Tannen, asserts, “If you leave out power, you do not understand any talk” (Troemel-Ploetz, 1991: 497).

Inevitably, men and women operate within a social hierarchy where males possess a particular status, maintained and reinforced through the sexual division of labour. Hierarchy influences whose version of a communicative problem will prevail. Therefore, separating intentions and effects is important. Even if, as Tannen suggests, men may not intend to dominate, the effect may be that they do. In the difference model, dominance and power are not seen as relevant dimensions when analysing an interaction. The outcome of a specific interaction may be male dominance but since this occurs without any intention, it need not be a concern. Maltz and Borker argue, “Even if both parties are attempting to treat one another as equals, cultural miscommunication results” (Maltz and Borker, 1982: 200). In a similar vein, Tannen claims that a cross-cultural approach allows us to explain miscommunication without allocating blame to either sex (Tannen, 1990 b). An innocence of communicative intent is assumed but the argument has certain flaws.

Firstly, speakers may actually possess an intention to dominate others in an interaction and may even describe the strategies they use to do this (Falbo and Peplau, 1980). Secondly, even if the intention is innocent, responsibility is obscured by ignoring effects. Language is a type of social action and has an effect. As Crawford claims, “Speech acts do things and these things cannot be undone by good intentions” (Crawford, 1995: 107).

In this context, the ten year investigation into the social construction of argument conducted by Mapstone (1998) is revealing. As a psychologist, rather than a sociolinguist, Mapstone was more interested in how people interpret the arguments they have at home and at work than in the linguistic strategies they employ to influence or persuade. She invited six hundred volunteers to keep detailed diaries of the various confrontations they had over the period of a week. These written records were supplemented by interviews, questionnaires and an experimental investigation involving seventy-two subjects.

Mapstone explains that her original aim in examining the impact of gender was to show that it made no difference. Her belief had been that all this talk of inequality was
exaggerated but she was forced to change her views. Her research findings “shocked” her: “There are clear patterns in the material and the only way to make sense of them is by assuming that men are resisting women’s demands to be treated as equal” (Mapstone, 1998: 4). She concluded that what her study showed was so completely against what we would like to believe that it was perhaps difficult to credit. With some exceptions, the men in her research discounted what women said when those women disagreed or argued with them. In other words, she found that frequently intentions and interpretations were not innocent and difference was not seen as equal.

This is the point made by Troemel-Ploetz. She argues that it is not that men do not understand what women want and so would provide it, if they only knew: “Men understand quite well what women want but they give only when it suits them. In many situations they refuse to give and women cannot make them give” (Troemel-Ploetz, 1991: 495).

This is further supported by Wajcman’s (1999) investigation of the prevailing norms of organisational culture. She notes that in societies such as ours where there are structured gender differences, it becomes difficult in practice for difference to be assessed other than negatively. Wajcman terms this the “inexorable tendency for difference to be evaluated as inferiority” (Wajcman, 1999: 159). Ignoring how power is enacted in communication and the role of intention misrepresents the complexity of talk between men and women. Indeed, the view of researchers, such as Troemel-Ploetz (1991), is that if power is ignored, no talk can be properly understood.

Therefore, differences in social status and the inequalities perpetuated by the sexual division of labour cannot be explained solely in terms of cultural differences. The implication of such a model is that when a misunderstanding occurs, this takes place between two equals of good will. Therefore, any consequence of their misunderstanding should affect both parties equally. However, even Tannen baulks at this implication and is forced to admit that, though both male and female styles are valid, the style common among women puts them at a disadvantage in the workplace. In other words, the consequences of any shared problem are more severe for women because they do not belong to the dominant group (Byrne, 2000a).
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This has particular significance when workplace meetings are examined. If women find male meeting norms a challenge and experience difficulty getting a turn to speak, then they can be judged quite harshly. But this does not hold the other way around, as will be explored in the analysis of the data collected for the present study. Henley and Kramarae have this to say about the background of inequality against which any particular interaction needs to be understood, “Hierarchies determine whose version of the communicative situation will prevail; whose speech style will be seen as normal; who will be required to learn the speech style, and interpret the meaning of the other; whose language style will be seen as deviant, irrational and inferior; and who will be required to imitate the other’s style in order to fit into the society” (Henley and Kramarae, 1991: 19).

The difference approach alone, therefore, is not an adequate explanation for what happens in Australian workplace meetings. But neither is the dominance approach. Both notions contribute to the way gender is constructed. As West and Zimmerman (1987) assert, gender is not simply a noun. It is also a verb. We ‘do’ gender continuously through the way we interact with others. Who we are and who we are perceived to be is dependent on our repeated performance of a particular gender identity. We construct our identity in our interactions and especially by our use of language.

Both frameworks, dominance and difference, may be laid one over another to assist in understanding the complexity of workplace talk. Cameron has argued for a shift from ‘gender difference’ to the ‘difference gender makes’. Taking this point further, the present study proposes that we need to examine both how dominance filters perceptions of difference and also how difference is involved in constructing dominance. In other words, it is the complex interplay between the two that underpins what happens when men and women meet at work. Rather than representing two mutually exclusive interpretive frames, the two are inter-twined in ways which vary across contexts and activity types (Byrne, 2000b). Social interaction is complex, people are multifaceted and behaviour subtle and varied.

The present study accepts Cameron’s (1991) argument that sociolinguists should not be content with a methodology which equates studying gender with simply cataloguing the differences between men and women. To make an effective contribution, we must take things further. Two additional objectives are proposed. First, the process by which
unequal relations are maintained must be demonstrated. Second, by revealing and
demystifying them, it is hoped they become more amenable to change and so allow the
development of alternative, more inclusive strategies.

The following chapter moves this account of research findings about women and men
into the more precise arena of turn-taking and the distribution of talk. Both the framework
of dominance/difference and also theories of turn-taking will then be applied to
Australian workplace meetings, providing a useful methodology for the data analysis
phase of this study.
Chapter 3.
Relevant background: turn-taking and the distribution of talk

Why turn-taking styles matter

Chapter two reviewed the research on women, men and language, concluding that it appears women and men employ different interactional rules in some respects, as a result of their different patterns of socialisation, and that the rules preferred by men tend to dominate in Australian organisations. Communication and power, it was argued, are intimately connected. Through workplace talk, power is exercised in such a way as to enhance the status of those in the dominant group and marginalise those viewed as not fitting in. Nowhere is this process clearer than in meetings and, for this reason, I have termed workplace meetings a ‘critical site’ where status is constructed and maintained. If, as Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997:6) claim, organisations are “talked into being” through meetings, then it is also the case that power relations are enacted through performance in meetings.

Holmes (1995) points out that the opportunity to talk in public is generally valued but that a key discourse problem facing women in public contexts is how to access their fair share of this valued talking time. In effect, the challenge facing those in a meeting is how to get a turn to speak and complete the turn, so that they create an appropriately assertive impression, neither abrasive nor passive, and hence position themselves as effective contributors. The subtle skills involved in achieving a balance between individual initiative, on the one hand, and collaboration with colleagues, on the other, are only hinted at in the recommendations put forward in typical workplace training products which generally offer advice of this type: “Make sure each team member participates. Stop the same people from talking all the time and facilitate equal contributions”. Yet the precise strategies and skills that would achieve these objectives are not explored and the reasons why the balance between initiative and collaboration tends to prove difficult are not explained.

As noted in chapter one, Tannen (1984: vii) calls conversation a “turn-talking game”. Particularly where meetings are concerned, the rules of this game are not discussed, yet the penalties for breaking them can be severe. In Australian teamwork and meetings, turn-taking norms have become so embedded in taken-for-granted procedures that they
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are neither challenged nor justified. Whether a meeting is formal or informal, planned or spontaneous, here are only some of the issues each participant must consider, even unconsciously:

- Should we speak at all?
- If someone should speak, who should it be?
- When we speak, how long should our turn be?
- Is there a special way the meeting should be opened?
- Can we speak in an overlapping way or not?
- How should we signal that we are about to finish?
- How should we indicate that we would like a turn to speak?
- What is the best way of giving our turn to a particular person?
- If someone tries to take our turn before we have finished, what is it appropriate to do?

(Byrne and FitzGerald, 1996: 92)

The price paid by team members for not resolving these dilemmas in a style judged as appropriate is seeing others take or be given credit for work which was partly theirs and watching development opportunities go elsewhere. In her study of how women fare in organisations, Wajcman (1999) interviewed a female manager who defined the problem in the following terms,

> It’s the people who speak up in meetings, who make good points, who get themselves visible that get ahead…men have been trained, conditioned, that in order to get up in the social hierarchy this is what you have to do, you have to take every opportunity to make yourself visible

(Wajcman 1999: 94).

In other words, to employ Burton’s (1997: 118) term and apply it to conversation, talk in meetings can be thought of as a “merit-accumulating opportunity”. For this reason, differences in turn-taking styles go to the heart of barriers to and failures of good communication in meetings.

**Overview of chapter**

The concern of this chapter is to examine the theoretical background of the concepts of turn-taking and interruptive behaviour relevant to the present study. In this way, the
explanatory framework of dominance intertwined with difference, explored in chapter two, can be usefully applied to the particular activity type of workplace meetings – the focus of the current investigation. Moreover, the existing research findings discussed in these two chapters have shaped the design of the present study and so they provide an appropriate introduction to the methodological considerations which follow in the fourth chapter. Finally, an important objective of my research was to test out the extent to which current views on male and female differences generally and turn-taking styles in particular could shed light on what happens in Australian workplace meetings.

To this end, the first section of this chapter seeks to establish what turn-taking is from the perspective of conversation analysis. The early research on the topic is discussed and generally-accepted norms examined. These turn-taking rules are then applied to studies of men-only conversation. In these situations, the principles established in early research appear useful and relevant. However, in the third section, it is argued that the rules seem less relevant and more questionable when studies of women-only conversation are reviewed. These studies suggest that women’s talk tends to follow different interactional patterns when no men are present.

This comparison of same-sex groups leads into a consideration of mixed-sex conversation and the controversial issue of interruptive behaviour. Interruptions, it will be argued, need to be evaluated in context: merely counting overlaps, as some studies have done, presents a misleading picture. Intentions and effects must be taken into account as well, if a more accurate analysis is to be achieved. For this reason, the issue of interruptions as violation or as facilitation will be explored. The chapter closes by underlining the importance of examining silence as well as talk. If interruptions are the sole research focus, then a more rigorous analysis of women as a “muted group” (Henley and Kramarae, 1991: 41) is jeopardised since to be interrupted, the person must have been talking. Therefore, focussing solely on talk misses the equally important issue of those not talking: although they were not interrupted, neither were they noticed.

**Turn-taking and the Sacks model**

In an influential and widely quoted study, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) recorded a large sample of naturally occurring conversations in order to determine the principles behind the system speakers appear to employ in organising their talk. They
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noted, “It has become obvious that, overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time, though speakers change, and though the size of turns and ordering of turns vary; that transitions are finely co-ordinated; that techniques are used for allocating turns” (Sacks et al, 1974: 699).

In the light of their findings, they proposed a model which they asserted applied to all conversations, regardless of topic, context, number of speakers or identity of speakers. In this model of sequenced, almost mathematical rules, conversation is broken down into small units of meaning. When one such unit has been completed, speakers arrive at a “turn relevance place” (Sacks et al, 1974: 704), or a point where it is possible to change speakers. One of three things can then occur. First, the current speaker may select the next speaker, for example, by addressing a question to a particular person, by mentioning someone’s name and drawing them in or, more simply, by using a non-verbal cue such as eye contact. Then the person who has been nominated, as it were, has the right to take the next speaking turn and no other person can appropriate that right. Second, if the current speaker does not select a particular person, then one of the other participants in the conversation may self-select to speak next. Third, if no one takes up the opportunity for a speaking turn, it is acceptable for the original speaker to continue. Then the rule sequence is repeated, beginning with rule one.

Essentially, the system assigns to an individual an exclusive right to speak and functions to minimise any gaps between speakers or overlaps in speech. The model can be termed a “no gap, no overlap” (Sacks et al, 1974: 708) system. In practice, this means that participants in a conversation who are interested in taking a speaking turn must interpret a range of subtle semantic, syntactic and prosodic cues with sufficient accuracy to enable them to predict the end of the current speaker’s turn. Their capacity to make such predictions avoids any gap between speakers. In addition, if they wish to be the next speaker, they must judge the beginning of their turn at the exact point of closure of the previous speaker and not before, so that there is no interruption.

Despite the complex challenges involved in accomplishing this, Sacks and his colleagues found that, in general, people manage turn exchange with a high degree of smoothness. “Transitions (from one turn to the next) with no gap and no overlap are common. Together with transitions characterised by slight gap or slight overlap, they
make up the vast majority of transitions” (Sacks et al, 1974: 708). They viewed the ‘slight overlaps’ they observed as the result of either an error, such as poor timing, or a ‘violation’. Since the person who currently holds the floor has the exclusive right to it, any intrusion into their turn can be interpreted as a ‘violation’ and would need to be repaired. An example might occur when two or more people self-select to speak next and they begin to talk at the same time. Some must then break off their speech prematurely in order to repair the problem and return to the rule of ‘one-at-a-time’.

The Sacks model has become a benchmark study, taken as revealing the speech-exchange system and its principles to us. Indeed, it now forms a frequent and unquestioned base for discussions of turn-taking in English-speaking societies by sociolinguists and discourse analysts (see for example Green, 1989 and Cook, 1989). In recently-published texts, the Sacks model can even be regarded as so much part of how we think about conversation that a summary of it need no longer be attributed to the original authors. An example of this is Paltridge’s (2000: 92) account of turn-taking,

In conversations, there are norms for who talks, when, and for how long, the basic rule in English is that one person speaks at a time, after which they may nominate another speaker, or another speaker may take up the turn without being nominated…Native speakers normally find it relatively easy and natural to know who is to speak, when, and for how long.

In effect, this is a summary of the Sacks model but its acceptance as self-evident has become so firmly established that, as in the example above, it can now be reiterated without any particular attribution.

Wierzbicka (1991: 81) links these turn-taking principles to an underlying value system where respect for individual autonomy is prioritised. This value is reflected in the concept of a speaker’s right to a discrete turn which can be completed, uninterrupted and unhindered by others who have a corresponding obligation to allow a speaker to complete their point. The expression ‘let me finish’, illustrates the sense of ownership and territory a speaker may claim when they take the floor.

This emphasis on individual rights echoes earlier work by, for example, Goffman (1967) who describes how speakers work to avoid invading each other’s speaking territory, with penalties for behaviour seen as inappropriate. He claims, “Interruptions and lulls are regulated so as not to disrupt the flow of messages” (Goffman, 1967: 35). For Goffman,
as Sacks, the territory or space occupied by a speaker is analogous to a type of property with similar rights attached. Conversation proceeds one interchange at a time, with the flow of talk “parcelled out into these relatively closed ritual units” (Goffman, 1967: 37). In a similar vein, Sacks uses the metaphor of an economic system where a speaker’s sole turn is the valued commodity. He states, “Turns are valued, sought or avoided. The social organization of turn-taking distributes turns among parties. It must, at least partially, be shaped as an economy” (Sacks et al, 1974: 701). Given that sole occupation of the floor is privileged within this system, a key theme emerging in the research is ‘completion rights’. When are these superceded by other considerations and when might it be possible to interrupt? It seems that completion rights are not absolute. Murray (1985) points out that a host can interrupt with, for example, an offer of food. Interrupting the current speaker to clarify something (Goldberg, 1990) or show that the listener has just ‘got’ the speaker’s point (Testa, 1988) can both be legitimate. In addition, listeners may judge whether someone has been monopolising the floor. In such circumstances, a person may feel they have a mandate to interrupt and their appropriation of the turn would not necessarily constitute an invasion of another’s territory (Byrne, 2000b).

This issue of interruption dominates the turn-taking literature and, building on the Sacks model, was taken up by Zimmerman and West (1975). In line with that model, they define a turn as not merely the duration of an utterance but also “the right and obligation to speak which is allocated to a particular speaker” (Zimmerman and West, 1975: 107). Their definitions have a moral tone, with a speaking turn seen as taking on some of the characteristics of other social privileges and responsibilities: along with the right to speak, they identify an obligation. An interruption, for instance, is taken to mean a “violation of the current speaker’s right to complete a turn” (Zimmerman and West, 1975: 123). In the context of this model, a true interruption is a departure from ‘correct’ behaviour and can be legitimately seen as a violation. Such violations are then viewed as strategies for enacting power by gaining access to the floor and controlling the topic of conversation. In their aptly titled article, ‘Small Insults’, West and Zimmerman (1983) describe interruptions as occurring when there is a deep intrusion into another’s speaking space. The interrupted person then drops out and, in effect, the interrupter usurps the previous speaker’s right to the floor.
Yet such violations come at a cost, with research findings showing that the interrupter runs the risk of being judged negatively. In a study conducted by Robinson and Reis (1989), interrupters were regarded as more assertive and more traditionally masculine. In addition, it seems there are penalties for those allowing themselves to be interrupted. Those who lost their turn on several occasions were rated by others as submissive and emotionally vulnerable. These findings have implications for women in Australian workplace meetings. To be judged as more masculine might function to reinforce and reward masculine identity in a man but prove problematic for a woman. Aries (1996) claims that women who are evaluated as somewhat masculine in their behaviour are seen as violating the norms for femininity and so tend to be disliked by both men and other women. This can be a high price to pay for visibility in a meeting.

**Men-only conversation**

Recent studies in this area (for example, Johnson, 1997; Kiesling, 1997; Coates, 2003) stress the variability of masculine identities and the complex role that language plays in their social construction. Robert Connell (1995) has also argued in favour of this multi-faceted approach to masculinities. He points out that the differences among men as a group need to be taken into account, and also the way in which these differences interact to create a coherent system of dominance and power. He sums up the complexity of this inter-relationship,

> To recognise diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognise the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit and so on. There is a gender politics within masculinity (Connell, 1995: 37).

In her commentary on work as the site of masculine purpose and achievement, Sinclair (2001:66) argues that the social construction of masculinity can be viewed as a central purpose behind many of the performances and practices displayed in Australian organisations. She states that men’s performances at work tend to be evaluated against a particular stereotype which privileges decisiveness, toughness, self-reliance, resolution and control. The prevalence of this stereotype contributes to the subordination of women
but it also limits men by prioritising one particular version of masculinity, to the exclusion
of others with their own validity. It seems that men, too, become casualties of
organisational cultures characterised by the competitive masculine ethos.

Research, such as the present study, which seeks to explore what happens when men
and women talk together at work must take account of these tensions and complexities.
Part of this involves the need to examine how men and women tend to operate in single-
sex groups, as this establishes the interactional norms associated with each gender. An
evaluation of mixed-sex talk can then analyse the extent to which accommodation
occurs and which group initiates this. However, as Coates (1998) acknowledges,
“because of the semantic conflation of being-a-male and being-a-human-being, research
focusing specifically on male speakers qua male speakers…is still relatively rare”
(Coates, 1998: 212).

One paper included in Coates’ collection on gender is that of Cameron (1998). She
analyses the conversation of a group of male students to show the linguistic strategies
they employ in order to assert a tough, heterosexual masculinity. While Cameron notes
that the talk of these young men shows evidence of overlapping speech and latching,
these features have a competitive purpose. Two speakers dominate the conversation
and, if individuals want a turn, they must vie for the floor. “…there is a hierarchy in this
conversation and there is competition” (Cameron, 1998: 278). Cameron also found some
limited evidence of cooperative strategies. However, she concludes that men can find
themselves under pressure to self-present as “masculine linguistically” (Cameron, 1998:
281) and that they may choose to accomplish this by avoiding any forms of talk
traditionally associated with women.

These comments cannot be asserted with any degree of certainty as Cameron’s sample
was restricted (five men watching a television program). In contrast, Coates (1997)
conducted a more extensive study involving twenty-six men, mostly speaking in pairs in
relaxed social settings. In total, she collected seventeen and a half hours of talk. Coates
wanted to investigate whether the conversation of her male subjects followed the Sacks
turn-taking model where speakers talk one-at-a-time, with an orderly transition from one
person to another.
She found a lack of overlapping speech in the data collected, with three particular exceptions: backchannel support, such as ‘yeah’ or ‘mmm’; the mistiming of a turn-beginning by a potential next speaker and occasional misunderstandings. In other words, these infrequent overlaps cannot be attributed to any attempt to create what Edelsky (1981) termed a collaborative or multiple floor. The speaking space is still individually owned in Coates’ data, with topics developed through a progression of monologues. Any deviations from this pattern can be explained in ways which confirm, rather than deny, the overall characteristics. Coates concludes that the men in her study appear to maintain equality by respecting a speaker’s right to a solo turn where each man’s individual ideas can be identified as belonging to him. Her most recent publication on male communicative patterns (Coates 2003) confirms this earlier claim.

Overall, her findings parallel Sacks’ (1974) comments on boys talking together mentioned in chapter two. He noted that the boys in his study prioritised the ability to hold an audience alone, even when there was little in the way of supportive comment to encourage them. Members of the audience group also asserted their identity. They interrupted with opinions and comments in such a way that the main storyteller had to relinquish his turn for the duration of the comment, then actively regain the turn to complete his story. A more recent study by Pilkington (1992: 46) describes a similar type of behaviour among the men in her data which she describes as ‘verbal sparring’.

This point is taken further in Kiesling’s (1997) research on fraternity members in a US university. He found extensive evidence of competitive talk and viewed this as reflecting notions of ‘a good guy’ as someone who demonstrates powerful, competitive behaviours. The conversation of the men in his study is filled with insults, boasts, orders, embarrassing jokes and stories (Kiesling 1997: 71). These are deployed as part of the construction of an individualised, competitively-oriented identity. Speaking turns largely follow Sacks’ ‘no gap, no overlap’ rule with the amount of talk reflecting each man’s relative status in the hierarchy. For example, Speed, a third year fraternity member, employs an argumentative, adversarial tone and uses imperatives (‘All right, look’) to appropriate a turn and impatient profanities to maintain it, for example, ‘Shut the fuck up’ (Kiesling 1997: 78). The principles behind singly developed floors of this type are explored by Wierzbicka (1991). She employs a culture-free semantic metalanguage to build a script aimed at capturing the key features of the model:
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Someone is saying something now
I can’t say something at the same time
I can say something after this.
(Wierzbicka, 1991: 81)

It appears, therefore, that studies of men-only conversation are illustrative of the Sacks model. In other words, male conversational practices reflect what is widely taken to be the norm. The next section will review some of the key studies concerning women-only talk which suggest that different underlying principles and objectives can be inferred in the deviations from the Sacks model evident in the data.

**Women-only conversation**

Coates (for example, 1989; 1996; 1997; 1998) has conducted extensive research on women-only talk in social settings, such as friends meeting in someone’s home. She summarises her findings over a number of years in the following way, “Women’s friendly talk is cooperative in the strong sense that speakers collaborate in the construction of talk, and that the voice of the group has priority over the voice of the individual” (Coates, 1998: 212). Her data show the particular linguistic strategies women employ to create positive social relationships. These include simultaneous or overlapping speech, minimal responses, epistemic modality, laughter and tag questions.

An important point which Coates emphasises is that women’s use of overlapping speech does not appear to reflect any attempt to violate the current speaker’s right to the floor. For this reason, the term ‘interruption’, with its derogatory implications, is inappropriate. She argues (Coates, 1997) that overlapping speech is inevitable when all participants view the floor as shared: speakers contribute simultaneously to the same topic without any sense of competition. Coates claims the women in her data do not want to seize the floor from the current speaker, preferring to contribute to a shared development of the subject under discussion (Coates, 1998: 243). Kalcik (1975), in her study of women’s discussion groups, came to the same conclusion.

In fact, research conducted by Edelsky (1981) suggests that women find overlapping talk congenial. She wanted to investigate whether women or men spoke more in a series of
informal faculty meetings in a university. She found that first she had to distinguish between a singly-developed floor, where one person spoke at a time, and a collaboratively-developed floor, with several people contributing. Women spoke as much as men in collaboratively-developed floors but men dominated the talk in singly-developed floors. She concluded that women seemed to be more comfortable talking when there was more than one voice. Being on the same wavelength, she observed, was inferred from long overlapping turns where the same idea was simultaneously developed by several speakers (Edelsky, 1981: 391).

Pilkington (1992), in her study of women’s gossip, found similar cooperative strategies. Rather than progressing the talk through the kind of competitive monologues discussed in the previous section on men-only conversation, the women in Pilkington’s study deliberately gave each other opportunities to join in and take a speaking turn. In addition, the women linked their turns to those of other speakers, for example, by repeating an idea. Such strategies emphasised group identity and collaboration. Women were also facilitative and cooperative contributors in Holmes’ (1995) New Zealand research. She viewed this as evidence of their concern to maintain solidarity and strengthen connection between the various speakers.

In their review of studies published between 1965 and 1991 dealing with gender differences in the use of interruptions, James and Clarke (1993) point out that there is considerable evidence of women employing more strategies than men which indicate support, collaboration and solidarity. For example, studies of women-only groups tended to serve a socio-emotional, cooperative purpose (Kalcik, 1975; Coates, 1989; Booth-Butterfield and Booth-Butterfield, 1988). In such studies, a certain pattern emerges in all-female talk which echoes the features outlined by Tannen (1990; 1994). These include frequent supportive overlaps, a high incidence of expressive back channel responses, a fast speech rate and frequent laughter. James and Clarke conclude, “No study that we know of has reported behaviours such as those mentioned as being more strongly characteristic of male than of female interaction, or even as being equally characteristic of male and female interaction” (James and Clarke, 1993: 260).

It is notable that almost all the research on women-only talk has focussed on social settings which were relaxed, informal and involved equals whose principal objective in
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meeting was to consolidate their friendship. This raises the possibility that the informal or social context in which these interactions were recorded was a key determinant of the style observed. Coates distinguishes between public and private spheres and, consequently, between public and private discourse systems. She sees male speakers as being socialised into the public discourse where the exchange of information is the objective. In contrast, female speakers are socialised into private discourse where the focus is on reaffirming relationships (Coates, 1998: 229).

Holmes (1995) accepts this distinction. She views the strategies women employ in what she calls intimate talk as being appropriate to those contexts, since the purpose is solidarity or connection. She asserts,

> Men tend to value public, referentially orientated talk, while women value and enjoy intimate, affectively orientated talk. Each gender may be contributing more in the situation in which they are most comfortable (Holmes, 1995: 37).

The implication of these claims by Coates and Holmes is that the style which appears to be natural to women is simply not suited to the quite different contexts and objectives found in the workplace and other public settings. They seem to be saying that women attempt to translate the strategies appropriate to intimate conversation into formal activities such as meetings, with negative consequences for themselves.

However, such researchers have not tested these implications by collecting data in women-only formal settings. If data collected in women-only workplace meetings showed evidence both of the collaborative strategies seen in social conversation among women and also that these strategies were effective in accomplishing work-related objectives, then the assumptions made by researchers such as Coates and Holmes would be challenged. The present study seeks to do this.

**Mixed-gender conversation**

Speaking turns are exchanged, talk distributed and topics developed in a smooth and comfortable way when people share the same communicative style or, at least, are aware of each other’s style preferences and can adjust to them. However, when assumptions about how an interaction should be managed are not shared, the result can
be information loss and mutually-held negative evaluations. If a speaker is unable to gain and hold the floor, they can find the conversation dominated by others. This unequal distribution of talk can then function to reinforce already existing disparities of power and status. In an interview I conducted with Professor Michael Clyne, for the SBS film *Success in Meetings* (Byrne, 1996), he summed up the issue in the following terms, “Turn-taking is about power. The people who can regulate other people’s turns and can prevent others from regulating their turns, get more of a say, and they have more power over other people”. Therefore, the procedures for turn exchange adopted by men and women, when they converse together, occupy a central position in research on gender and language.

Tannen (1994a), for instance, draws on her own investigations and those of others (for example, Maccoby, 1990, as discussed in chapter 2) to explore the strategies men and women tend to employ in workplace talk. She asserts that the methods many men have learned for taking and keeping the floor in informal conversations better prepare them for talk in formal workplace meetings. The result is that such meetings are positive experiences for more men than women (Tannen, 1994: 301).

An example of what can occur in mixed-gender conversation is provided by a study where students were divided into two seminar groups, one structured and the other unstructured (Sommers and Lawrence, 1992). In effect, the unstructured group employed the open system of turn exchange which tends to prevail in a typical workplace meeting, where speakers wishing to contribute a point must seize the floor for themselves and possess the skills needed to fend off possible interruptions until they have completed their turn. The researchers found that, in this condition, women initiated less, were interrupted more and more readily relinquished the floor in the face of interruptions, than in the structured condition, where turns were allocated by the tutor.

A similar pattern emerged in a study conducted by Smith-Lovin and Brody (1989) involving thirty-one groups with six people in each. The groups were set a problem and a monetary prize was offered for the best solution. Both men and women interrupted but, when men were speaking, women were less successful than men in gaining the floor as a result of an interruption. In contrast, when a woman was speaking, both men and women successfully interrupted and appropriated the turn for themselves. The
researchers’ conclusion was that men interrupt women more than men and that men are difficult for women to interrupt successfully.

These studies underline the complexity of the process involved in interrupting a current speaker. Conversation is always a joint construction with each interactant playing a role in how the event unfolds: the communicative behaviour of both speaker and listener work together to help establish meaning. Erickson (1986: 295) captures the interactional nature of conversation in a particularly vivid image, “Talking with another person...is like climbing a tree that climbs back.” Where interruption is concerned, the current speaker must tacitly agree to stop talking and forfeit the remainder of their turn if the interruption is to be deemed successful. Frequently, a topic change follows which suggests a lack of support for the point the original speaker was attempting to explore. In other words, losing your turn can mean watching the point you were trying to make become sidelined as well.

For these reasons, in seeking a behavioural measure with which to gauge dominance, researchers have selected the issue of interruption, since this is a violation of the current speaker’s right to complete their turn, according to the Sacks model. The phenomenon of interruption is viewed as a method of determining the extent to which men’s domination in society generally may be reflected in everyday conversation involving men and women. Researchers have regarded this particular discourse feature as having broader social and political significance since it concerns how talk is controlled and power enacted.

The most influential and widely cited study on the topic was published in 1975 by Zimmerman and West, who recorded thirty-one extracts of naturally-occurring conversations in informal settings, such as coffee shops. In defining what constituted an interruption, they drew on the Sacks model which sees interruptions as violations. The interrupter begins speaking more than two syllables away from a possible completion point of the current speaker. Zimmerman and West found that, in mixed-gender conversations 96 per cent of the interruptions in their data were by men.

This study was followed in 1976 by Eakins and Eakins who examined the patterns of turn-taking in seven meetings within a university faculty. They found that men spoke
more, interrupted more and that women with the least status (in this case, without a Ph.D.) fared the worst. Tannen (1994b: 55) calls the view that men interrupt women more often and more successfully than women interrupt men “one of the most widely cited findings to emerge from research on gender and language.”

Nevertheless, this assumption has come to be questioned. In their review of the interruption literature, James and Clarke (1993) state that most studies find no significant differences between men and women, in terms of the total number of interruptions in any given sample of data. However, they also point out that comparisons among these studies are problematic because the counting methods employed and, indeed, what is defined as an interruption, vary from one to another.

In addition, there is the vexed question of how to interpret an interruption. For example, it is not the case (as Zimmerman and West imply) that all interruptions are disruptive in their effects and are intended as dominance moves or hostile acts. In fact, some interruptions may have the opposite underlying purpose and may even be experienced as supportive by the current speaker.

Kennedy and Camden (1983) recorded the talk of graduate students in seminars and classified the interruptions they found under five headings: clarification; agreement; disagreement; tangents and subject changes. Thirty-eight per cent of the interruptions they noted represented agreement and eleven per cent could be defined as clarification. In other words, half of the interruptions were not disruptive. They concluded, “In many cases, interruption seems to serve a healthy, functional and confirming communicative role” (Kennedy and Camden, 1983: 58).

This study demonstrates the importance of taking context into account, including intention, effect and reaction or perception. For example, Kennedy and Camden (1983) regarded agreement as a supportive move. However, someone can also interrupt the current speaker, ostensibly to agree with their point, but go on to use this as a socially-acceptable method of appropriating the turn for themselves. Therefore, the meaning of a particular linguistic strategy cannot be identified from its form or from a narrow, mechanical definition which, while it may render counting easier, may also obscure what is actually occurring between people.
This helps to explain the seemingly paradoxical fact that both men and women can complain of being interrupted by each other: they may be objecting to different behaviours, based on different assumptions about their overall communicative goals. Tannen (1990: 210) provides the example of a man recounting an event in his job as a volunteer cashier for a charity market. At the end of his day’s work, a shortfall in his takings was discovered and he had to make good the amount himself. The woman listening to this story wanted to show sympathy for his predicament. To do this, she interjected at frequent intervals with small expressions, comments and brief affirmations of her support. However, the man interpreted these behaviours as interruptions, designed to take over his speaking turn and create the opportunity for the woman to recount an anecdote of her own. In a similar vein, Tannen (1994b: 65) shows how overlapping, latching and supportive questions produced discomfort for one of her subjects, David, who did not share the high involvement communicative style of his companions. He wrongly interpreted their interest and enthusiasm for his subject as disruptive. Tannen cites David’s pauses, hesitations, repetitions and circumlocutions as evidence of his growing tension: he interpreted their support as hostility.

The studies by Coates and others outlined in the previous section on women-only conversation, suggest that, in the absence of men, women’s preferred style tends to follow a collaborative pattern with features such as overlapping talk, backchannel comments and a collaboratively-constructed floor. As a result, it may be that women do not approach mixed-gender conversations as contests where participants must compete for the right to a turn. Their preferred style may be at odds with the one-at-a-time pattern, where overlaps can be judged as disruptive violations and speakers may choose not to build on each other’s points.

Scollon and Scollon (1995) argue that even quite small differences in interturn pauses can lead people to develop negative judgements of each other’s competence and character. These differences are associated with cultural background, as well as gender. In a highly multicultural workforce such as we have in Australia, both variables (gender and culture) can work together in a particular meeting to produce miscommunication. Scollon and Scollon identify the difficulty in these terms, “The problem of negative attitudes arises because interturn pauses are not just simple silences between turns;
they are points at which each speaker must make a quick judgement about what to do next, and that judgement must be based on what he or she assumes the other is likely to do” (Scollon and Scollon, 1995: 64).

Some cultures, for example in Southern and Eastern Europe and Latin America, value a somewhat similar high involvement conversational style to that described by Coates (1996) in relation to women from an English-speaking background. Speakers collaborate with each other in such cultures, expanding and supporting each other’s points energetically and enthusiastically. The effect is like an orchestra where different instruments combine to make a musical whole (Byrne, 1997; Byrne and FitzGerald, 1996; Clyne, 1994; Tannen, 1994).

However, Asian cultures can have rules for turn-taking in meetings which are different again. In such societies, questions of face, deference and hierarchy are often seen as central to good working relations (Clyne, 1994). This deference tends to be expressed in longer pauses between turns and even sometimes by a silence. The pause indicates respectful listening and ensures that the current speaker’s turn has been properly completed. Those with less status may contribute when invited to do so but should keep their points brief (Byrne, 1997; Scollon and Scollon, 1995).

What happens when speakers used to these two other ways of taking turns in a meeting interact with English speakers? The first group, the high involvement overlappers, may come across as rather volatile or even rude. The second type of problem occurs when English speakers, used to shorter interturn pauses, work with Asian colleagues who prefer longer pauses, as part of an overall strategy of deference politeness. Those used to a more ritualised way of ordering turns can experience frustration and confusion when they attempt to get a speaking turn. The sense can build up of being dominated or even bullied. Meanwhile, from the perspective of many Australian-born colleagues, the silence of the South East Asian team member can become oppressive: the Australians can feel that they are making all the effort to carry the conversation. As the Scollons describe,

Quite unconsciously, he or she will find himself or herself repeating things, paraphrasing prior statements, simplifying and linguistically back-filling to account for the conversational gaps and arrhythmia (Scollon and Scollon, 1995: 66).
As well as culture, the variables of setting and task demand may influence the way speaking turns are managed. For example, some research studies suggest that the more intimate the relationship, the less salient gender may be as a defining category. Relative power or a more dominating personality may affect interruption patterns among very close friends or partners (Drass, 1986; Kollock et al, 1985). This point has particular significance when reviewing the gender-related turn-taking literature, since much of this concerns social talk recorded in the subjects’ own homes with friends or family members. In contrast, the current study concerns workplace meetings where, although the subjects know each other, the nature of their relationship is by no means intimate. In addition, as James and Clarke point out in their review (1993: 263), many studies were conducted in a laboratory setting. In fact, only twelve out of the forty-three studies they list examined naturally-occurring speech. Smith (1985) suggests that the more contrived context of a laboratory may provide unintentional encouragement for controlling behaviour and, consequently, male dominance may be artificially enhanced.

A third methodological problem concerns the small size of many samples. For example, in the influential study of Zimmerman and West (1975) described earlier in this section, a quarter of the interruptions they recorded in their eleven mixed-sex conversations came from one person, a particular male student who continually interrupted a female teaching assistant. When an overall sample size is small, one person’s behaviour can affect the results, leading to unsafe conclusions about gender, since variables other than gender (such as a domineering personality) may be implicated.

Fourth, simply recording the raw number of interruptions can be misleading. For instance, if one individual dominates the talking space excessively, there is evidence that others present may feel that interruption no longer constitutes a violation (Byrne, 2000b). Another participant may feel they have a mandate from the group to disrupt the person who is unjustly monopolising the floor. For this reason, James and Clarke question whether some studies which counted interruptions and found no gender difference may have produced different results if interruptions had been measured as a rate in proportion to talking time, not a number, since most research has found that men talk more than women in mixed-gender conversation (James and Clarke, 1993: 265).
Fifth, some researchers have suggested that turn-taking patterns may be affected by task demands. Informal, social contexts may favour a ‘relaxation’ of the turn exchange rules proposed by Sacks et al (1974) as the norm. For example, in Edelsky’s (1981) study, the collaborative floors she noted, where there was more overlapping talk and women contributed more, were also associated with periods in the meetings where the talk was more personal and less task-oriented. The setting of Tannen’s (1984) account of a high involvement turn-exchange pattern was a Thanksgiving dinner party. Coates (1998) also acknowledges the key features of the contexts within which she recorded her data: relaxed, informal, involving equals whose objective was to consolidate their friendship. Aries (1996: 89) points out that supportive interruption is a feature associated with personal, informal settings with low task demands. This raises an issue relevant to the present research study. Setting and task demands may outweigh gender-based preferences in workplace meetings, so that the style found in social talk among women friends will not be found in such settings, not because of male dominance, but because the overlapping style is simply inefficient and inappropriate in a problem-solving meeting.

A final point worth noting is the date of many of the widely-cited studies which suggest that men dominate women in mixed-gender interactions. It is now 2004 and twenty-nine years since Zimmerman and West’s (1975) influential paper was published. In Australia, this period has seen the development of the legislative framework supporting equal opportunity; the impact of social reform movements such as Women’s Liberation and the Women’s Electoral Lobby; and the emergence of a new generation of women whose education and upbringing have centred around notions of equity, assertiveness and social freedom. It may be that this revolution in the relationship between Australian men and women has influenced behaviour in mixed-gender conversation. Indeed, James and Clarke (1993: 264) in reviewing the literature (most of it American) admit that while 70 per cent of the earliest studies showed men interrupt more, only 22 per cent of the later ones showed the same pattern. This raises the question: what is the situation in today’s Australian workplace?

**Conclusion**

Interruption may serve a wide variety of functions, from supporting the current speaker to usurping their turn. The context is, therefore, key in interpreting a particular example of interruptive behaviour. What was intended? What was the effect? How was the
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interruption experienced or perceived? Much research in this area has been conducted in laboratory settings or in informal, social contexts involving friends. Relatively few data have been collected in naturally-occurring workplace meetings, especially those where additional variables such as status differences or cultural diversity may play a complicating role. Even studies of task-centred talk may not replicate the typical features of the twenty-first century workplace. For instance, in her analysis of Edelsky's (1981) data, Aries (1996: 89) categorises those meetings as informal, as, in fact, does Edelsky herself.

Holmes (1995: 37) asserts that men value public talk, while women value relationship-oriented talk. Consequently, each gender contributes more in those situations where they feel most at ease. Is this actually the case in Australia today? Are women uncomfortable in the workplace and in public life generally? Can this be an adequate explanation for the paucity of women in senior roles within Australian organisations?

By raising the issue of who contributes more to talk in formal contexts and who speaks more in informal settings, the focus of Holmes encompasses more than interruptive behaviour. If someone is silent, they cannot be interrupted but neither are they able to create an assertive impression by arguing their point. There is a common assumption, prevalent in the management and training literature, that powerful people dominate the talking space in a meeting and enforce the silence of those who are less assertive. Spender (1980), for instance, claims that men dominate women by silencing them. If this is the case, then there may be more involved than interrupting. In what sense do those who contribute little or nothing in a meeting collude to create the circumstances where this becomes possible?

This chapter opened with a reference to Tannen's (1984: vii) definition of conversation as a “turn-taking game” and the point was made that, when this game is played in the workplace, the rules are not discussed yet the penalties for breaking them are severe. A review of the literature on the topic serves to underline that problems with these rules go deeper still: they are subtle, complex, susceptible to variation, but appear to be immune to serious challenge.
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These issues, together with the methodological concerns outlined in the previous sections, indicate the timeliness and relevance of the present study. The following research questions are suggested by the gaps in the literature discussed in chapters two and three and so constitute an appropriate focus for the current investigation.

* What seem to be the interactional norms of men-only workplace meetings?
* What seem to be the norms of women-only workplace meetings and are these the same as the features of women’s informal, social talk identified in previous studies?
* Is women’s typical style suited to workplace problem-solving meetings?
* In mixed gender meetings, do men silence women and so contribute to negative judgements of women’s capability?
* If this is the case, is there evidence of collusion on women’s part or do they seek to counter this effect?
* How does what happens between women and men in meetings contribute to the differential outcomes for women in Australian organisations which are apparent in the statistics?

The next chapter will outline the approach to data collection which I adopted in order to explore these questions. It also explains the methodological issues and practical problems which arose as I attempted to put my plans into action. The difficulties inherent in research of this type, particularly the challenge of gaining access to workplace meetings, are described together with the strategies I employed to overcome these as far as possible.
Chapter 4.
Methodology and data collection

Allowing the research purpose to determine the design

In a recent discussion of data collection in pragmatics research, Kasper (2000: 316) makes the following observation, “Social scientists in any discipline struggle with the issue of how to gather appropriate data to answer their research questions.” As this chapter will detail, I have certainly struggled with this but not for the precise reasons Kasper has in mind. The issue for me was not which method would be best – that became clear quite quickly – but how I could make it happen. The central part of this chapter is necessarily constructed as a narrative, describing my research journey with its challenges, obstacles and setbacks, leading eventually (or I would not be in a position to write this thesis at all) to a ‘happy ending’.

There are a number of interrelated reasons why I have chosen to write about this process. First, my rationale for constructing the research in a particular way grew, almost organically, from my primary objective: to investigate why so few women move into leadership roles within Australian organisations. It was also strongly influenced by my evaluation of the current research literature, its strengths and weaknesses, as examined in the previous two chapters. The limitations of this research and the lack of Australian workplace data suggested particular directions as potentially useful. In this sense, this chapter forms part of a logical sequence and functions to synthesise what has gone before.

However, an additional reason for treating this chapter as a form of narrative, outlining the steps in my thinking is my wish to communicate the degree of difficulty involved in research of this nature. Doing so may prove revelatory to colleagues who have not worked in this way and useful support to those wishing to embark on projects with a similar overall purpose, irrespective of discipline. This last point is one I feel strongly about since I felt quite isolated in my research endeavours, finding, as many others may also, that universities cannot offer much in the way of practical help, although mine has been encouraging of my aims and intentions. My experience has been that, even where fellow researchers are concerned, if someone has never attempted to get inside
organisations and film what people actually do in their everyday working lives, they tend to be unaware of the difficulties involved in such an enterprise.

Lastly, in speaking about my research at a number of conferences over the last three years, I have been struck by the reaction of academics in a range of social science disciplines. They appear to view me as someone who, after collecting some interesting data, has worked out a set of practical uses for my research, such that organisations now want to take these up. They would like to know how I have achieved this so that they may adopt a similar process. For example, two well-regarded senior academics (in different fields and from different countries) have contacted me, feeling that I may be able to advise them (and their teams). They believe they have collected a rich corpus of data and are now keen to develop what each has termed “commercial applications,” as a spin-off from their work.

These overtures (and the fact that I am unable to respond to them) have highlighted for me some issues relevant to this chapter which I had not previously considered, perhaps because I am not myself an academic: my approach to research design is, in fact, the other way around, with the “application” or practical use coming first, not last. The issues of relevance and usefulness have been a central concern from the start. Indeed, as mentioned in the preface, the thought of embarking on a PhD thesis came later (one year later, to be precise). I had decided to undertake this research anyway, had already begun preliminary work and secured a Commonwealth Government development grant before I approached a university. I felt the issue I had chosen was important enough to give several years to its investigation and I was (and am) committed to influencing positive social change in this area. I agree with Cameron’s (1991) argument, described in chapter two, that sociolinguistics should not be content with a methodology that restricts itself to the mere cataloguing of phenomena. I also find support from those authors who seek to make an overt connection between scholarship and a desire to change the status quo (for example, Stanley and Wise, 1990: 21). I want to be involved in what ‘ought to be’, not just what ‘is’.

Given this social activist purpose, the next step in my thinking was to consider who precisely did I see as the audience for this research project: who is it that I wanted to influence? By clarifying this at the beginning of my research, my intention was to factor
this understanding into the design so that the issue of ‘commercial applications’ becomes not only irrelevant but, at a deeper level of principle, would, for me, be indicative of a certain lack of connection to the social context. It has perhaps become more fashionable in recent years to admit that one has social change purposes in mind with a piece of research. However, it seems to me that in the social sciences people still shy away from allowing this intention to influence the way they design the investigation. This is not about entertaining a blinkered approach where the message one would like to be able to communicate is determined in advance. It is more about selecting a method that will ensure the data are accessible: how the findings will be shared becomes a serious consideration from the outset. In effect, I did not see my primary audience as an academic one but as men and women working in Australian organisations, particularly those whose role gives them the discretionary power to influence change.

I did not necessarily view myself as pivotal in this process since, even if I did nothing else at all from now until my retirement, there would be only a limited number of people I could personally influence. For this reason I wanted my research to lead to the creation of training resources for use in professional development within organisations. In this way, I felt, my findings would have the greatest chance of reaching the greatest number of people.

But what would make this resource stand out and compel attention? It seemed to me this was the key next question for me to reflect on. Many resources of one kind and another are produced with variable results. In a controversial area such as gender, one problem is that a particular approach can be dismissed by employees as simply the presenter’s personal view of the world. The resource comes across as lacking credibility because the base of its assumptions is not transparent and persuasive.

One example of this type is a video training package on teamwork in a multicultural workplace produced in 1995 by the then Office of Multicultural Affairs (now the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs or DIMIA) and titled *In a Nutshell*. In the video, we meet people from various cultural backgrounds who are members of a factory team. Helena, originally from Poland, must guide the team so that its members are, as the video explains, “empowered by their new communication skills.” The five participants surprise us by speaking fluently and with an impressive command
of English grammar, one that most native speakers of the language would not
demonstrate in their meetings. In fact, of course, the whole resource has been scripted
and reflects the views of the authors as to what they see are the issues facing a
multicultural team and how they imagine individuals might handle them.

Resources constructed this way rarely overcome the handicap of such an artificial birth.
People can easily dismiss what they are shown with remarks such as, “It’s not like that
where I work”, “That never happens”, “That’s just your opinion”, or even “You’re just
saying that because you’re female / a consultant / left-wing ”… or whatever dismissive
statement comes to hand!

Some resources are better quality and are built on a solid research foundation rather
than personal opinions and subjective experience. An example of this type is the
Monash University resource *English and the Multicultural Team* (Bowe and Fernandez,
1996). This resource uses short dialogues derived from actual data collected by Clyne
and his team (Clyne, 1994). Conversations were audio-recorded in various Melbourne
factories and a representative sample was then given to actors to use as scripts for the
filmed sequences. However, because we do not meet the real people in their genuine
interactions, the resource inevitably has a stilted, artificial quality, despite the scholarship
behind it.

In contrast, my intention was to share my filmed data with as wide an audience as
possible and to be able to stand back from these data and let them make their own
impact. In this way, I could share some of the tools and techniques commonly employed
in conversational analysis to encourage others to begin to notice key patterns which had
previously escaped attention, were accepted unquestioningly as norms, or were
commonly misunderstood. In my work as a management consultant, I continually find
that course participants value learning how to observe what is actually going on in an
interaction. Practising observation techniques using authentic, documentary video
sequences paves the way for noticing similar issues in real life. When people become
aware of what is going on and going wrong in their communication, they become
motivated to learn how to put it right.
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This intention led directly to the final step: my data needed to be filmed, and filmed to what is termed ‘international broadcast standards’, to ensure high quality sound and picture. By filming people in their normal work roles, the complexity of real life can be explored. The interplay of status, personality, gender and culture becomes evident, together with the range of pressures and events which must be coped with at any one time. Real life, unlike a script demonstrated by actors, has a tendency to be messy and confusing, with many variables interacting simultaneously.

Scripted sequences also run the risk of portraying stereotypes whose communication has been contrived and there are already enough stereotypes with dubious origins in this field! This tends to invalidate points of analysis and commentary. In contrast, I wanted the analytical points to arise naturally from the data, without being determined by me in advance. Such materials are more effective in influencing change since the issues raised on screen cannot be rejected as unconvincing. In this way, people can take more from them, at their own level and in their own way.

This explains something of the purpose underpinning my investigation and influencing the way I chose to collect the data; the next section summarises the research questions I wished to explore. The third section examines what can be the advantages and disadvantages of filming as a procedure. My aim is to show how I sought to maximise the strengths of my chosen approach and to develop strategies for overcoming its potential weaknesses. It seemed to me that the success of this research project in making a useful contribution to workplace change would depend on my ability to secure high quality, naturally-occurring data and this was my central preoccupation for the first three years. Poor quality or methodologically suspect data cannot stand the weight of analysis and tend to buckle under scrutiny. The phases the research went through will then be recounted, as I attempted to obtain the sponsorship and the many levels of consent vital to a project of this type. The chapter closes with a descriptive account of the corpus of data on which I base my analysis. This analysis comprises the subsequent chapters of the thesis, together with a discussion of the implications of the findings.

Research questions
As I have indicated, there are likely to be numerous factors contributing to the relatively small number of women moving into senior roles within Australian organisations. Some
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of these include the need to balance work and family responsibilities; the paucity of reliable child care; discrimination on the grounds of potential pregnancy and the challenge of breaking into non-traditional employment sectors. Clearly, what happens in face-to-face interactions in meetings is not the sole explanation for the differential outcomes experienced by women and men in organisational life. However, it could be argued that a successful research project accomplishes its objective because it focuses on an achievable result, rather than attempting too broad an investigation. By making visible the ways in which men and women routinely interact in meetings, I hope to expose the processes by which unequal relations are maintained in such settings and, as a result of demystifying them, suggest some useful change interventions. This would be, I felt, a positive contribution offered by sociolinguistics which might enrich and extend the insights contributed by colleagues from other disciplines, such as sociology and organisational theory, who are engaged with the same problem of women’s progress into senior roles.

I proposed to film different kinds of meetings for the purpose of contrasting the data and forming some relevant generalisations about male-female interaction in the Australian workplace. Specifically, I endeavoured to collect data in the following categories:

- all-male teams;
- all-female teams;
- predominantly male teams where the team leader was male;
- predominantly female teams where the team leader was female;
- teams with an even balance of men and women, at a similar level within the organisation.

I wanted to investigate the extent to which the Sacks model (examined in chapter three and widely regarded as descriptive of how speaking turns are exchanged) was employed in men-only, women-only and mixed gender workplace talk. I also wanted to know whether the extensive research by Coates and others on women-only social conversation was relevant to what happens in workplace meetings.

Researchers have emphasised that the collaborative nature of women’s social talk may partly be influenced by the informal nature of such settings, where the interactants are equal in status and their purpose is to affirm their relationship to each other. Coates
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(1998: 229), Holmes (1995: 37), and Aries (1996: 89) all see context and purpose as at least partial determinants. The question then arises: do women employ their preferred social style in the workplace and, if they do not, is this because the style is simply inappropriate in task-centred, formal contexts? If women do not employ the key features of what research suggests is their preferred style in social conversation, is this because of its inefficiency, or because they feel obligated to conform to male norms in order to be positively evaluated? When men and women work side by side whose style dominates and what accommodation occurs? Who interrupts whom? What seem to be people’s intentions when they work together and how do these contrast with the effects and perceptions of their discourse strategies?

Before I began filming, I wrote the following note to myself and reread it frequently during the preliminary analysis of the data:

Look at the purpose of each interaction. Was it successful in terms of that purpose? Don’t have any preconceptions – just watch what happens. Evaluate the interaction in terms of its outcomes and try to approach each one freshly. Look at each type of meeting and see whether any hypotheses suggest themselves. How successful were people in getting others to listen to them? How are topics initiated and changed? Look for the strategies people seem to employ and the pay-offs of these, as well as the reactions of others to those strategies.

I have mentioned that one question which interested me was, “What did people intend to achieve?” There were several reasons why this was a concern. First, I assumed that my subjects’ insights would be relevant and provide additional material of value. This is not always the view taken by others: many researchers have not asked subjects’ whose talk was recorded what they had intended to accomplish in a particular interaction.

Kasper (2000: 334) points out that subsequent interviews of interactants can be useful, indeed indispensable, when the research goal includes establishing the meaning that a particular communicative strategy has for those who employ it, since otherwise such “emic meanings” can only be inferred from our observations of behaviour. An example of this difficulty is mentioned by Holmes (1995: 43). She collected data from a large
number of public meetings which involved a presentation followed by questions from the floor. Men asked most of these questions and generally dominated the relatively brief discussion opportunities. Holmes considered possible explanations for the women’s reluctance to ask questions, including feeling uncomfortable, feeling unwelcome and feeling ill-informed on the topic and hence embarrassed. She concludes, “It is obviously not possible to be certain which, if any, of these explanations account for women’s behaviour in formal seminars” (Holmes, 1995: 43). Her dilemma may well be a result of not asking the women in her study this useful and straightforward question.

A second reason for interviewing as many of the subjects as possible was to expose potential discrepancies between what individuals said about themselves and what was actually captured of their communicative behaviour in the course of filming. Many recent studies on gender have been based on secondary data alone, for example a values survey, a structured interview, a questionnaire asking for people’s reactions to hypothetical scenarios or inviting people to rate themselves against certain criteria. The inherent difficulty with such studies is that there can often be a discrepancy between how individuals self-describe and how they actually behave in real workplace situations. This discrepancy may even be held below the level of conscious awareness. In other words, someone may sincerely hold a view of themselves, their values and preferred communicative style which cannot be inferred from primary, naturally-occurring data. As Boxer (2002: 16) points out, “People have a good idea of how they should interact, but reality often demonstrates that their linguistic behaviour deviates greatly from this idealised notion.”

By endeavouring to capture reality and so expose any discrepancy between what people say and what they do, I felt the present study might contribute to a discussion of the limited application of data based on interviews alone. I was also interested in the opportunity of using any examples of a gap between the ‘rhetoric’ and the ‘practice’ as a springboard into a deeper analysis. The concept of ‘management by values’ and the challenge of aligning espoused values with actual behaviour within organisations is a current ‘hot topic’. Managers and leaders are keenly interested in discovering the power of values as an integrating force within teams and organisations. During 2001 and 2002, in my regular ABC Radio National presentation on human resource issues, this topic of aligning values and behaviour came up frequently.
A final rationale for including interviews wherever possible after filming a meeting was that the design of an effective training intervention is partly dependent on an analysis of people’s intentions. For example, if it emerges that individuals whose communicative behaviour had the effect of muting team members from minority or marginalised groups (such as women, Indigenous people or immigrants) had not intended this outcome and were shocked when confronted with evidence from the footage, then the approach taken to improve this situation would involve strategies which assume good will. In contrast, when it emerges that those dominating others are influenced by narrow and inaccurate stereotypical assumptions, even prejudices, then the approach adopted must include tackling these issues. Lastly, where individuals intend to dominate and feel fully justified in behaving this way, then an intervention must be strongly directed towards dismantling the psychological architecture which tends to support such rationales. This must be taken into account before considering alternative behaviours since, initially, there is likely to be little motivation for change.

**Filmed data as authentic discourse**

Recordings of spoken interaction can be categorised along a continuum from authentic to contrived. Kasper (2000) argues that the key determinant of authentic discourse is that it is motivated and structured by the participants’ goals not the researcher’s. In contrast, elicited conversation and various types of role play are brought into being for research objectives. This does not invalidate data collected under these conditions and, indeed, some researchers (for example, Scarcella, 1983) have judged these methods particularly useful when the purpose is to investigate a specific aspect of conversational management. However, I would agree with Kasper (2000: 318) that elicited data can never be the same as authentic conversation since “the overall purpose of an interaction is its most powerful structuring force.”

The data collected for this study meet Kasper’s criteria for authentic discourse. The researcher had no involvement in determining who would attend a particular meeting, what the agenda would be, who would chair it or what would be the goal of the interaction. These were all regularly-occurring meetings where participants discussed the problems and other issues facing them, as they had intended, irrespective of my research purpose. Had I not been there, these meetings would still have gone ahead.
If one team member who usually attended a meeting I had planned to film, refused their consent for the recording, then I did not film that meeting, on the grounds that the team’s typical dynamics might be disturbed. In fact, this only happened on one occasion. After a group agreed to be recorded, a male team member telephoned me to say that he did not wish to be filmed, since he had concealed his whereabouts for the past three years after refusing to pay child maintenance contributions to his ex-wife. In accordance with my policy of ensuring a meeting to be filmed was as normal as possible, I declined to film this team minus one of its members.

In some studies, participants are given a topic to discuss by the researcher or are asked to work together to reach a particular goal which has been assigned to them (see, for example, FitzGerald, 1996; and FitzGerald, 2003). Kasper classifies these as “elicited conversation” (Kasper, 2000: 320). Although the way such conversations unfold and the outcomes they reach are not predetermined by the researcher, nevertheless they will be influenced by the overall task structure imposed. For this reason, elicited conversation is useful when the researcher wishes to examine a particular type of speech event: the researcher can control some parameters to elicit that activity type. However, elicited conversations also run the risk of pre-selecting the variables the researcher thinks are important, by dictating the structure, the task and the topic. As Boxer (2002:16) argues, in her discussion of the various data collection methods typically used by sociolinguists, the researcher cannot possibly know which variables are salient in particular speech exchanges, without capturing naturally occurring exchanges and analysing them to discover the variables which actually emerge as important. For these reasons, no control or influence was imposed on these data.

If the aim is to enter into the subjects’ natural experience and capture this with the richness of detail which will support a thorough analysis, then video recording must be the preferred method of data collection. Clyne (1994: 19) argues that video data can illuminate crucial aspects of an interaction including turn-taking, pauses, the communication context, order of the speakers and the relation between verbal and non-verbal communication. These features were highly salient in my research.
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Sociolinguists writing on the complex phenomena involved in turn-taking routines stress the role of non-linguistic factors. Cook (1989: 53) describes the use of eye contact to signal turn exchange, with speakers tending to look away during their turn and then looking their interlocutor in the eye at the close of the utterance. He also mentions body position, physical alignment and movement. Paltridge (2000: 92) underlines these same points. In this context, I find Tannen’s (1984: 36) comments on the topic surprising. She asserts that the information lost from non-verbal channels when employing an audio – not video – recording procedure “is not so great a short-coming” since multiple channels are generally redundant, with nothing significantly different contributed by the addition of the visual channel. On the contrary, audio-recordings cannot provide the researcher with a full account of an interaction. For example, they cannot explain what was happening during a silence or who may have wished to talk but gave up the attempt. They tell us nothing about what was going on during a speaker’s turn: what were the reactions of others’ present? Perhaps no-one was even listening? James and Clarke (1993: 267) in their critique of the methodologies employed by studies on interruptive behaviour note the problems caused by the general lack of video data, especially the researchers’ inability to take into account non-verbal turn-yielding signals.

It may be argued that non-verbal behaviour can be complex to analyse, particularly (as is increasingly the case in the Australian workplace) when subjects come from a range of cultural backgrounds where we know there can be extensive variation in non-verbal behaviour. However, this should not be an argument for avoiding video-recording but rather an argument for sharing the data collected with participants themselves or with colleagues in the field, in order to check possible explanations.

An example where this procedure was relevant occurred in an earlier research project I undertook, also using filmed data (Byrne, 1996). In Hanoi, I recorded a meeting between senior officials in the Vietnamese government and two Australian executives. The more senior of the two Vietnamese began his first speaking turn with a sideways darting movement of his eyes. Was this personal idiosyncrasy, nervousness, unease at being recorded or was there a possible cultural significance I was missing? By showing the footage to a group of Vietnamese sociolinguists the matter was clarified. They were united in stating that the official’s non-verbal language at the start of the meeting, in particular his flickering gaze, was intended to indicate that he regarded himself as the
most senior person present and, therefore, protocol would demand that the others, including the two Australians, should adjust the length of their speaking turns so that these were always slightly shorter than his. This did not occur and produced the irritation evident (only non-verbally) as the meeting progressed.

This example underlines two significant issues: the importance of not dismissing the possible meaning and role of a non-verbal signal simply because it may initially be obscure to the researcher. Secondly, the usefulness of collecting data in a form in which it can be shared.

This last issue is key where video data are concerned. People can be identified much more easily on video than in an audio-recording. In addition, under copyright law an individual's face is copyright to themselves when they speak and can thus be identified (as opposed to simply providing background in a crowd, for instance). Consequently, filming properly involves securing the ethical and legal consent of subjects. If the researcher has not obtained such consent, the material cannot be shown to others. Therefore, transcriptions only are the basis for any shared discussion and analysis, just as is normally the case with audio-recorded data.

Tannen (1984) feels that providing a transcript enables a reader to check the interpretation provided by the original researcher and the reader can then make their own judgement based on the evidence. This is only partly true. In his “Casebook of Methods”, Antaki (1988: 110) calls a transcription, even a careful one, a “prose approximation to the rush of words in ordinary speech.” Where a research project is concerned with discourse features such as turn exchange, interruption and simultaneous speech, there can be key differences between the “prose approximation” and the interaction itself. For example, a transcript is necessarily a linear sequence and, although conventions are available for indicating overlaps, these must be expressed one after another. There is, therefore, a sense in which a transcript shapes the interaction in unavoidable ways. Edelsky (1981) discusses how the form in which subjects’ utterances are set out on the page can give a false impression of who interrupted whom. Jefferson (1973) and Ochs (1979) similarly describe the way transcription can affect the interpretation of an event, such as overlapping speech.
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The question then arises: if video data have all these advantages, why do more researchers not employ this approach? The answer is provided by Clyne (1994: 19) to whom I referred earlier, citing his list of the features video data can successfully illuminate. After listing the strengths of video, Clyne goes on to give the following reasons why researchers tend to avoid it:

It is, however, hardly surprising that so little use has been made of video in linguistic research considering the difficulty of carrying around the equipment and recording in an industrial situation with high electrical interference, classified information and the likelihood of respondents opting out. Moreover, video equipment is conspicuous and would probably affect communicative behaviour…(Clyne, 1994: 19).

Clyne’s mention of the equipment size and possibility of electrical interference are both minor technical problems which need not trouble the researcher working some ten years after the publication of his remarks, with the new compact but powerful digital cameras now available. However, he is right that some respondents will opt out of video recording who may have agreed to an audio format. As already mentioned, subjects can be identified on video and so more elaborate protocols quite properly apply. Organising their consents is time-consuming but does not represent an insurmountable obstacle to the persistent and committed researcher, as I will detail in the next section.

The claim that a more conspicuous method may affect behaviour is the most serious of the arguments against video data and so I believe it is appropriate that, as a researcher committed to this method, I should argue the case for my data being treated as authentic and naturally-occurring.

Essentially the problem concerns Labov’s (1972) observer’s paradox: the presence of the researcher and their equipment might disturb the usual way an interaction unfolds. However, this potential weakness tends to be raised by those who have limited or no experience of working this way. If instead we look at how researchers with extensive experience in the method evaluate it, a different picture emerges. The conclusion of the anthropologist and ethnographer Duranti (1997) is that the self-consciousness about being recorded is only temporary. He argues that if the event being recorded is routine, with each participant just performing as they normally would, the novelty soon
disappears and the routine takes over. Holmes (2000), who collected video data in the New Zealand workplace, also found that her subjects increasingly ignored the camera and made comments which indicated that they had forgotten about it. She concludes that she and her team collected examples of talk which were “as close to natural as we could have dared to hope” (Holmes, 2000: 2). Kasper (2000) has also collected video data in a range of settings and agrees that, once the interaction is underway, people’s usual behaviours re-emerge. Kasper further argues that this is the reason why more time needs to be allowed at the start for participants to get used to the presence of the equipment and feel at ease.

At this point, it is worth noting that participants in the present study signed two types of consent. The first concerned participation in the research study while the second outlined the training purpose to which the data would be put. Both individual subjects and participating organisations were assured the right of veto where the second category was concerned – no-one would ever view this footage, except the researcher, if they did not wish it. In that case, the material would be factored into the research analysis but the sequence would not be published as it stood. This assurance enabled participants to relax, knowing that, if they mentioned something confidential or potentially embarrassing, they themselves could check the footage and alert me to the time-code numbers of any problematic sequences.

There was extensive evidence of participants speaking in a relaxed, natural way without any self-consciousness or self-monitoring. For example, people mentioned patented processes, their clients’ confidential issues, financial and other serious problems facing their own organisations and personal remarks about or criticisms of senior management. This high level of openness (even, it could be argued, indiscretion) indicated that they felt relaxed. In addition, I took care to emphasise that I was a sociolinguist not an investigative journalist! My aim was to analyse their talk, not embarrass them. So they themselves viewed all material from the two cameras since, although the sound would be identical, perhaps one camera had caught an embarrassing shot not picked up by the other. Significantly, I have over seventy hours of footage but only approximately four hours of this cannot be shown. Even this can be shared in transcript form when names of individuals, their organisations and other identifying features are removed. Generally, a team vetoed nothing at all and, now and again, mentioned one or two shots they would
prefer not used from a whole filmed meeting. As well as establishing a respectful and ethically-based relationship with my subjects, there was one further step I took in order to ensure that they felt as relaxed as possible: I employed someone who, among his many skills, knows how to do this.

Having read everything I could on the topic of methodology and, in particular, on the well-rehearsed criticisms of video-recording, one thing struck me as rather odd. Many social science researchers who avoid video appear to assume that, because they do not themselves possess the expertise to put their subjects at ease and so encourage natural talk, this skill does not exist. Perhaps because I was committed to investigating how I might best ensure what Kasper has called “authentic discourse”, I made no such assumption. How did others in the field overcome what must, after all, be a common concern, I wondered? I looked to the experiences of highly regarded researchers who have been involved in video recording to learn what they had done in order to secure good quality data.

Two such researchers are Professor John Gumperz (University of California) and Dr. Celia Roberts (London University). Both, it emerged, had worked with the film maker John Twitchin who, for twenty years, was in charge of the BBC’s education and training department and is now freelance in London, with his own company. On the telephone, I discussed with John Twitchin how he set about filming real people engaged in their everyday workplace interactions in such a way that they were quite natural and relaxed. Armed with his advice, I advertised and then interviewed a range of Australian directors with solid experience in documentary films. Unfortunately, none of them was quite right. They tended to see the project as a story with the potential to be another *Rats in the Rank* (ABC 1999): the unfolding drama of a team that cannot get along, or has to survive a merger or must restructure… Finally, I telephoned John Twitchin again and invited him to come to Australia and help me collect the raw data I wanted. He did so in 1996 and again in 1999.

John has an extensive track record, having made more than two hundred documentary programs this way, is committed to education and training and understands the goals of sociolinguistic research. As well as taking charge of the film crews I had hired, and the technical aspects of the project, John brought his twenty five years of expertise in
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securing naturally occurring, workplace data of this kind to the key task of helping participants to overcome any self-consciousness. At the start of each session, he discussed the technical aspects of filming with the participants, answered their questions and generally reassured those who had no previous experienced of being recorded on video. In each setting, we allowed plenty of time for this process to ensure people felt at ease from the outset.

Organising the data collection this way, enabled me to focus on compiling my field notes, as I had decided that the arguments of those researchers who advocate combining several approaches were persuasive. Kasper (2000) discusses the strength of procedures which seek to triangulate the researcher’s interpretation of authentic discourse data through the use of interviews (see also Gumperz and Cook-Gumperz, 1982, Bremer et al, 1996 and Boxer 2002 on the importance of interviews in enriching recorded data), together with verification from field notes. The use of data collected from different sources and employing different, but complementary, techniques enhances the credibility of a study and strengthens the validity of any findings and recommendations.

Paltridge (2000: 72) points out the dilemma facing researchers: too much participation may influence the event being examined, while too little might mean limited data. He concludes, “It is important, then, for fuller and more reliable descriptions, that a number of different approaches to gathering data be drawn on.” Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997: 48), who examined the discourse of corporate meetings in a British and an Italian company, concur with this position. As well audio-recordings of meetings, they kept extensive field notes together with informal interviews with their subjects. I found my own field notes invaluable as I analysed the filmed data and reviewed participants’ comments in their interviews (also filmed). Field notes record the way the event unfolded and the impression it made at the moment it occurred. This enriches and verifies other sources and, for these reasons, I decided that it was not the researcher’s job to be responsible for the technical aspects of data collection. The following section goes to the heart of two activities which most definitely are the researcher’s responsibility: gaining access to organisational data and managing a project of this scope to a successful conclusion.
Making this project happen

There are a number of implications arising from the procedure outlined in the previous section. First, constructing a project this way, with a focus on capturing filmed data within organisations is likely to encounter access difficulties. Second, it will be expensive and will, therefore, require government and corporate sponsorship if it is to be achieved. Third, a great deal of time and effort will need to be set aside for the development phase. Indeed, filming and analysing the data are likely to be much more straightforward than setting up the research in the first place, since there will be fewer variables to be taken into account. This section is not intended to provide a thorough treatment of how I tackled these issues since that would run the risk of taking the thesis in a different direction – a guide on how to secure and manage corporate support for social science research! However, I believe it is relevant to include a brief overview of the various stages involved in mounting research of this type since the challenge of obtaining my data has been a central, even dominant, theme in my research journey and it is a challenge which I had to tackle alone.

As mentioned in the Preface, this study grew out of a previous research project where I had collected filmed data in a range of Australian organisations, here and in Asia, with the objective of investigating culture as a dimension influencing workplace communication and behaviour. Inevitably, that corpus of thirty-seven hours of authentic discourse, together with ten hours of related interviews, involves men and women and so provided me with a starting point for considering the question of gender. However, it did not include some of the particular meeting-types listed in section two of this chapter, for example women-only meetings. Therefore, I did not believe I could simply re-visit that corpus, analysing it in a different way, although I have included much of it since, together with the data collected specifically for this study, it provides a total corpus of just over seventy hours of authentic meetings and related interviews, filmed to international broadcast standards, with two cameras in most cases, in eighteen Australian organisations. It may be the case that this corpus constitutes a unique research resource.

Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997) collected data in just two organisations, one British and the other Italian, in order to examine meetings as a social phenomenon. Their focus was not on the controversial topic of gender, they did not film their subjects (in fact, they
found video cameras were banned) and were not intending to disseminate their findings through a training resource. Nevertheless, they encountered serious obstacles.

Access to the two companies was not an easy task, and research on spoken business discourse has undoubtedly been constrained by the confidentiality and sensitivity of many business meetings. The task of gaining access to companies and convincing managing directors that the research will be worthwhile is an extremely difficult one. Regrettably, relatively few researchers are likely to succeed in this task. (Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1997: 45).

As I began work on this project at the beginning of 1997, and discovered considerable resistance to what I wanted to do, such comments made me feel more determined or more pessimistic – depending on my mood. I decided to begin with a series of focus groups and enlisted the support of a number of influential senior women. One of these was Barbara Cail, Director of the lobby group Senior Executive Women. In each case, I described what I wanted to investigate, what my purposes were and asked both for their advice and how they viewed the issue at the heart of my research: what is preventing more women from progressing to senior levels within Australian organisations? The message to me from these focus groups was quite simple: what you want to do is interesting, significant and much needed but we don’t think you’ll be able to do it. As I very quickly learned, the subject of gender tends to be one of the ‘undiscussables’ in organisational life. No-one wanted to talk about it. The reasons for this are complicated and reflect the issues I have already detailed, particularly in chapters one and two. Moreover, it was not simply senior men who refused to become involved in research on gender. Many women also talked about organisational pressure not to speak up. Reardon (1995: 23) encountered the same phenomenon in her interview-based research. She discovered that women “acquiesce to an unwritten rule: Serious businesswomen do not involve themselves in gender issues.”

I found that the sensitivity around the topic of gender compounds all the usual problems researchers face in workplace data collection. Kasper (2000: 318) points out,

Frequently the most difficult part in gathering extended authentic data is to gain access to the research site. Institutions are often reluctant to allow any form of observation, and if they do, they may not allow
recording. Yet without audio – and preferably video-recordings, the entire research enterprise will be in jeopardy.

After about seven or eight months of familiarising myself with brick walls of various kinds, I knew it would be several years before I actually collected any data, if indeed I ever did. The process of making endless phone calls, sending documents and flying interstate to make presentations is time-consuming and expensive for someone not attached to an institution, and without research funds of any kind. For this reason, I decided my next step would need to be obtaining a development grant to provide printing and travel expenses: persuasion is expensive.

I approached the Commonwealth Office of Status of Women (OSW) with a proposal but initially had no success in even securing a meeting. Over some months, I paid closer attention to the press criticisms of OSW policy directions, international publications by the UN and local stories concerning Australian working women. I was then able to write to OSW again with a much more sharply targeted overture, outlining why their involvement in my project would be an appropriate choice on their part, in particular the way in which it would balance the current emphasis on strategies to tackle domestic violence which, while obviously a critical issue, caused the perception in some areas that the government had little to say to working women. In this way, I secured my first meeting and was finally able to talk directly about my project to Pru Goward, the Director at that time. I gave examples from the published literature to sketch in some of the key themes and I also indicated the ways in which I believed my research might take us further, both in our understanding and in our development of useful interventions. I left the meeting with a $10,000 development grant which was doubled shortly after by a further $10,000 from the Australian Public Service Commission.

However, a year later (mid 1998) I still had no more sponsors and no-one willing to allow me to film inside their organisations. I attended my first residential week for PhD research students at my university and had to make a formal presentation on my progress to about fifty peers and several academic staff members. I listened to the presentations of many other research students timetabled ahead of me. Most of them had begun collecting data already or were well advanced in their arrangements. Where their research involved ‘human subjects’, generally these were friends, acquaintances,
students in an academic setting or members of a group set up for the purpose and organised by the researcher. In other words, their subjects were readily available and very obliging. I listened in vain for any ‘comrade’ with whom I could share my difficulties and frustrations. My own presentation briefly outlined the topic and my research aims but the focus was on my problems. By then I knew a great deal about each of these and detailed what I felt I was up against in relation to money, access to subjects, time and other kinds of much-needed support. I asked for the group’s suggestions and advice and then closed. The comments that followed included expressions of interest in the topic, of good luck and good will, but no suggestions at all.

The failure of this presentation to provide me with any practical ideas proved to be a turning point in that it made me realise that I had unconsciously thought a formula or prescription might exist for making such a project happen: if I just asked enough of the right people (for example, senior women, fellow researchers, academic faculty members) I would meet someone who would give me a blueprint. After that presentation, I returned to my student’s room in the university hall of residence, having drawn a blank in my request for advice and faced the reality that, even if a way existed, I was unlikely to meet anyone who could tell me what it was. I would simply have to create my own blueprint by breaking down into a manageable size the problems which currently seemed overwhelming and impossible.

At this time, I was in the middle of expanding my own consulting company and extending the range of contracts we took on so my life already felt very demanding and even too busy. However, I resolved to do just one thing each day towards making this project happen. This decision together with two others are what I believe produced a positive outcome. First, I decided that every single person I contacted would be helpful to me, even if they could not give me what I asked for and both of us were initially unable to see what possible role they might play. I felt strongly that a breakthrough could come in an unexpected way and that I would be more likely to seize an opportunity if I held few, if any, assumptions about what an opportunity might look like. I felt too that each person I spoke to was a potential member of a network or coalition of interested people I should create around my research project to help it gather momentum. I wrote a formal ‘thank-you’ letter to each person I contacted (even if they appeared to have done nothing) and kept in touch with them all, with regular updates, for the next two years.
Second, I decided that what was obviously going to be a long process in securing money, support and access to case studies, could become a strength if I allowed it. It enabled me, in effect, to explore the three basic research principles put forward by Cameron et al (1992:131) and work out for myself how I might in a very practical sense express these within this project. These principles are: the use of interactive methods; the importance of the subjects’ own agenda; and the questions of feedback and knowledge-sharing. As Cameron et al assert:

- Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects;
- Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them;
- If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing.

The three years it took me to arrive at the point of actually starting to film in organisations meant that I had listened a great deal. How did my potential subjects view the issues that concerned me? Were there other, even significantly different, topics which they saw as related? What did they need? What did they want? I learned, for example, that Australian organisations are more concerned about and interested in the topics of leadership and teamwork, than gender. From my perspective, there is no difference. Effective teams are those where everyone contributes and feels valued and a strong organisation is one which draws its leaders from as wide a pool of talent as possible, irrespective of gender or cultural background. This extended period of dialogue between myself as researcher and my potential subjects/audience provided the gift of a slow gestation. The relationship arising from that process benefited the project and helps to explain why the notion of discovering some “commercial applications” at the end, seems strange and even artificial: in my case, the issue of sharing knowledge was built in from the outset.

This protracted dialogue also helped me to understand my subjects and their concerns enough to be able to produce an effective marketing booklet about the project which aimed to describe in what ways the research might benefit individuals and their organisations. I sent this to possible sponsors, and designed another version of this, appropriate for those organisations not wishing to give financial support but considering whether they would allow me to film meetings of their employees. These documents were strongly focused on the positive outcomes to them from their involvement, not on my needs. It is important to emphasise that these benefits did not include any kind of
editorial control or influence on findings or approach. The consultation process, as mentioned earlier, concerned checking the footage so that I did not unwittingly include ‘commercial-in-confidence’ matters which might damage individuals or the organisations they represented. In fact, my experience was that, far from wanting to influence my findings in any way, the many people involved enjoyed the stimulus or intrigue of being engaged in a research project where we would allow the data to deliver their own story.

By mid-1999 I had secured $350,000 from four sponsoring organisations: Telstra, Westpac, the Public Service and Merit Protection Commission and the Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women. This amount was slightly smaller than that I raised for my 1996 project on cultural issues in the Australian workplace. That had required $550,000 since I also filmed Australians working in several Asian countries. However, on this occasion, the filming was confined to Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra in order to control costs.

I had engaged my technical crew by mid-September, John Twitchin’s ticket was booked from London and, at that stage, more than ten organisations had agreed to allow me to film. Some of these were very large and so were able to provide a range of occupational types and gender mixes, from male-dominated engineering sections to female-dominated human resource departments. I then drew up the film schedule. This is an elaborate and highly detailed timetable, showing every conceivable arrangement for the period of filming, from what time the film crew will leave a hotel, routes we will take, who will be filmed and where, parking and access, lunch – every item set out until the ‘wrap’ at the end of each day. We recorded meetings in the categories listed in section two of this chapter over a period of three weeks, using two small cameras. One camera focused on the current speaker, while the other held the simultaneous group or reaction shots.

Over December 1999 and January 2000 I analysed the interactions and prepared the paper edit of selected extracts. Early in 2000, I edited the material into training films and wrote the handbooks to accompany them, detailing a one day workshop around each. The resource kits were formally launched in Sydney in June 2000, publicly at the annual conference of the Australian Human Resources Institute, and privately at a party in
Sydney for the twenty-five people who had been most closely involved. At that point, I could begin to analyse the data more rigorously and start the writing of this thesis.

**A profile of the corpus of data collected**

The organisations involved in the filming were private sector companies in the telecommunications, financial, software design, and engineering sectors, together with three large and one smaller Commonwealth Government departments. Two hundred and fifty-five subjects were filmed, with the number almost evenly divided between women and men. Their level within these organisations was middle to senior management and they ranged in age from late twenties to late fifties, with the majority being approximately 35 to 45 years old. A table located in the Appendix provides further details, including the names of the organisations, the type of teams, the number of members in each team, and the gender and ethnic backgrounds of the subjects.

There was at least one first generation immigrant to Australia in many of the teams I filmed in both 1996 and 1999. This is quite typical of Australian workplaces today, where over 85 per cent of organisations have more than four different cultures represented among their staff. The subjects from a non-English speaking background came from twenty-one different countries, reflecting the broad base of immigration to Australia over the last twenty years. In four of the meetings filmed, there was a staff member with an Indigenous background.

Subjects were filmed as they engaged in their regular meetings, following their own agenda and dealing with matters of practical concern in their usual way. No-one took on a role that was not authentically their own. No-one was consciously seeking to demonstrate or exemplify a particular behaviour or communicative style. Two cameras were used and the filming was conducted by a professional crew working to international broadcast standards. This was essential in order to capture all reactions, non-verbal signals and the complexity of exchanges in speaking turns found during typical meetings. In most cases, the team was also interviewed at the end of their meeting and asked to comment on the points observed by the researcher relating to their communicative behaviour. These comments provide useful, additional material, illuminating participants’ intentions and their own rationale for the behaviours observed.
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In some instances, such an interview was not possible as participants could not give the additional time this required.

In order to assist the data analysis phase, of the seventy hours of footage in the total corpus, approximately two thirds of this has been fully transcribed. The first step in the analysis involved viewing the material several times and noting those sections where there were points of interest, such as an example of a common pattern emerging, an instance of misunderstanding, or trouble in the interaction which was either handled well or badly by team members. Such sequences have now been viewed more than fifty times. The analysis procedure I have adopted follows that outlined by Gumperz (1982: 17) in his discussion of interactional sociolinguistics where the focus is on identifying those systematic differences in conversational style which can typically contribute to misunderstanding, loss of contributions and negative evaluations. Interactional sociolinguistics looks specifically at how communication and miscommunication arise, together with the larger societal implications of what the researcher has noticed (Boxer, 2002:14).

I looked for patterned differences in the linguistic strategies participants chose to employ in their meetings. In this process, I took account of participants’ own reflections on their intentions in and experiences of not only the meeting filmed but also meetings generally. I looked specifically at how the men and women I filmed used the linguistic resources available to them in ways that performed a gendered identity. In addition, I noted places where other variables, such as cultural background, personality or status, seemed to co-vary with gender.

The findings explored in the following chapters necessarily involve transcripts from only a selection of this extensive corpus. However, these have been chosen to represent the larger body of data and any generalisations made are based on all the footage collected. The transcription conventions employed are listed at the end of this chapter.

Data filmed in this way provide the real-life context in which the communication occurred and capture all the moment-by-moment reactions which appear to influence how speaking turns in formal contexts are taken and maintained. The interplay of verbal and non-verbal cues can also be demonstrated by examining the footage frame by frame.
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Since the material is authentic, it reflects the complexity of real life where other variables such as status, personality or cultural background, inevitably interact with gender in a given situation. All this provides the opportunity for a useful analysis of how men and women enact their gendered identities in Australian organisations, the linguistic strategies they employ in the process and the consequences for their careers which appear to flow from these choices. The following chapters take up this theme through a detailed discussion of the data.
Workplace Meetings and the Silencing of Women

Transcription conventions

.. indicates a short pause

… indicates a longer pause

{ indicates overlapping or simultaneous speech

[ ] square brackets enclose additional information, e.g. [sighs]

emphatic words are indicated in bold text

= indicates latching (a rapid turn transition with no pause or overlap between two speakers)

- indicates an incomplete turn, or one which stops suddenly, e.g. because it was interrupted

x indicates an unintelligible word
Chapter 5
Data analysis: men-only meetings, men’s style and men’s experiences

Overview of chapter
This chapter examines interactions in a number of men-only meetings and aligns these with their reflections on the experience of appropriating a valued speaking turn. These were provided by the men themselves in the filmed interviews, conducted after each of the meetings in question. The picture which emerges from this evidence is more complex than that presented in the limited number of published studies on all-male interactions. For example, in the data collected for this study most interruptive behaviour among men appears supportive of the task, rather than an attempt to put down a male colleague. It may be that task-centred talk will inevitably involve disagreements and interruptions. When these are interpreted as useful, they do not seem to be associated with animosity or a breakdown of the usual turn-taking system of a single speaker floor. This is significant since the data involving men show a preference for a singly-developed floor, where one speaker occupies a sole turn. When interrupted, men tend not to continue speaking. However, the data also provide considerable evidence that this system (where the first speaker to seize the floor gains the next turn), is problematic both for men from other cultural backgrounds and for less assertive men. The style appears to favour confident, Anglo-Celtic men, not any man.

Meeting of four male engineers
In this first meeting, there is a distinct hierarchy in terms of the level of the four participants within their organisation and this is reinforced by the age differences among them. Rob is in his mid-fifties and is the head of the Research and Development section of a software company which designs and manufactures Environmental Monitoring Units (EMUs) for airport control towers, within Australia and internationally. Each unit generally requires considerable technical modification to suit the circumstances of a particular airport and these modifications are the responsibility of this section. Paul is about thirty-five and is in charge of the project being discussed. Jeremy is in his late twenties and Steve, who has recently joined the company after graduation, is the most junior team member. This is an informal meeting, convened around the equipment they are experimenting with in the company’s technical laboratory. The team holds problem-
solving meetings of this type several times a week and Rob generally sits in when he is available.

**Example One**

2. Rob: {Tut [audible intake of breath]
3. Steve: {One of the new requirements of the EMU is that the
4. Rob: {Tut
5. Steve: {third octaves be attached to the events.
6. Rob: Yeah, well [sighs]. Hang on. What do
7. we really need and where did this
8. problem come from?
9. Steve: {Yeah th-
10. Jeremy: {It's go-
11. Paul: {Well-
12. Rob: Do they really know what they want?
13. Paul: It's a general requirement. I think we've
14. got to…um…do something about it…um…
15. the only question is…how best to do it=
16. Rob: =Yes, but do we want one second time
17. history for each frequency?
18. Steve: For each band, for the entire duration of the
19. event=
20. Rob: =And we've got to store all of that?
21. Steve: Yes for {each second.
22. Paul: {You see
23. You see, if you do…You mentioned
24. that maybe we'd do it like the time
25. history which is just store all of it
26. and then reference it back later on…
27. We're talking about 33 times {as much data
28. Rob: {I understand
29. I understand. But I'm just looking at the
30. upper limit.
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Speaking turns are exchanged very smoothly with no examples of sustained overlap and, if the meeting had been audio-recorded instead of filmed, it might have appeared that this smoothness was simply the result of an intuitive rapport the men had for each other, perhaps because they work exclusively together and also share the same professional background (engineering). For instance, Cameron (1997: 56) points out that latching, of which there are a number of examples in this extract, is often judged as a mark of cooperation since, “in order to latch a turn so precisely on to the preceding turn, the speaker has to attend closely to others’ contributions.” However, when the non-verbal signals are laid as a second template over the transcript, a different impression emerges. Rob, the most senior person, can be seen to control the overall direction of the meeting by, in effect, allocating turns for occupying the floor. The other men respond to his signals. It is as if Rob uses non-verbal techniques to orchestrate the talk. This is reinforced by his use of direct questions to push the team’s thinking forward through the linear problem-solving structure they appear to share. The smoothness may be more an outcome of his control, rather than a sign of interpersonal rapport.

Steve opens the discussion by mentioning that he has encountered a problem. Rob ‘tuts’ (lines 2 and 4) and indicates his attention with an audible intake of breath. These small sounds are enough to signal that he intends to take the next turn and, indeed, all three men turn their heads at this point and look at him before he begins talking at line 6. As Rob sighs, he rocks backwards in his chair with his arms spread and hanging down loosely on either side of the chair: It is a commanding, slightly dramatic, body position and makes his question (“Hang on. What do we really need?”) more authoritative.

Unsurprisingly, the three others respond immediately, chiming in together. Rob cuts off this eruption of simultaneous speech with another question and this time he looks directly at Paul as he speaks at line 12. Paul at once puts down the piece of equipment he had been holding, puts his right hand on his hip and strokes his chin with his left hand, aligning his body towards Rob. Steve and Jeremy turn their heads slightly in Paul’s direction. All this occurs during Rob’s question, “Do they really know what they want?” In effect, Rob has cued Paul into the next turn. Paul has accepted that he will speak next and, by shifting his physical alignment, readies himself for the turn. Meanwhile, Steve and Jeremy have taken note of what Rob wants and, by turning their
heads and shoulders to look at Paul indicate their acquiescence. With his turn set up for him and no competition, Paul begins smoothly at line 13.

However, what Paul now says contributes nothing new to the issue: he simply states they will have to do something about the problem but the question will be how best to do it. His short pauses and hesitations suggest he knows he has nothing of substance to add and his colleagues reinforce this impression since all three look away from him as he speaks. Predictably, Rob comes in immediately. This latching at line 16 gives an abrupt, impatient impression, not a cooperative one. If, as Cameron suggests, Rob has been attending very closely to what Paul said, his purpose seems to have been to seize the floor and make the group explore the topic in the way he thinks they should. As he asks the question, he turns towards Steve and they exchange several remarks quite rapidly at lines 18-21. By this time Paul has perhaps had enough time to work out what he wants to say and he comes in at line 22, overlapping with Steve at this point. He raises his voice slightly and repeats the filler ‘you see’ twice, causing Steve to drop out. Paul leans forward in his chair, as if literally to occupy the territory of the floor by spreading himself into it and proposes an approach to the problem he feels is worth exploring. At line 28, we see Rob employ the same turn appropriation technique – a stressed, repeated phrase, in this instance “I understand. I understand” and he takes the team’s thinking back to what he believes is the best line of inquiry at this stage of the meeting.

It is evident that these four men are highly responsive to the give and take of non-verbal signals which facilitate their exchange of speaking turns. Moreover, it is Rob who is the director responsible for many of these signals. He uses this repertoire of linguistic and non-linguistic strategies to enact the power that goes with his more senior status. In the following extract we see similar tactics at work.

**Example Two**

1. Paul: When the time comes, if they decide,
2.      yes, this is how it ought to be done,
3.      {then
4. Jeremy: {Mm
5. Paul: we’ll burn it into the instrument
6. and give them the end result=
7. Rob: =Well, as Paul’s saying, we can give
8. them a limited capacity. It might store
9. a few hours of {events
10. Steve: {Yeah
11. and say you’ve got to download it then?=
12. Steve: =We could take some of the memory
13. from the time history as well.
14. Paul: We ought to keep a rolling store of
15. 36 hours, for example.

Paul is explaining a procedure they might adopt to meet the client’s needs and Jeremy interpolates a small supportive ‘mm’ at line 4. In fact, there are very few minimal responses or examples of back-channelling not only in this meeting but in all the men-only data in my corpus. As Paul is speaking, Rob moves back in his chair, draws in his breath audibly and strokes his right hand over his right ear and cheek, finishing the movement by rubbing his chin. Steve and Jeremy turn their heads towards him. In this way, when Rob comes in quickly at line 7, this is only what is expected. His body language communicated unequivocally not only that he wished to speak next but that he did not want to wait long to do so. Paul took the hint and finished his point. Is this an interruption? Obviously not, if all we pay attention to is a printed transcript. But there is a powerful sense in which, if your boss makes it clear that you should hurry up and finish because he wants to say something, you may decide it would be prudent not to complete all of what you had intended. From Rob’s point of view, if he can interrupt but achieve this by non-verbal means then he can preserve the popular Australian image of the egalitarian boss and yet still control the proceedings.

At line 7 Rob comes in with the soothing opener “Well, as Paul’s saying…” He then raises the next issue he would like the team to address. As he speaks, he turns his head towards Steve and looks at him. Steve’s “Yeah” at line 10 functions both as support for Rob’s point and also as an acknowledgement that he has understood he is to respond. He does so at line 12, gesturing with his arm extended towards Paul and swivelling his body towards him. As expected, Paul picks up the turn at line 14.
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The whole meeting is rather like a team sport where the ball is tossed around a circle of players. The ball is either thrown to you specifically or it is not. There does not seem to be much you can do to influence whether the ball comes in your direction. It certainly does not come to Jeremy who said very little during the whole meeting and contributed only two small responses in these extracts. The impression given in much of the literature on men and women’s talk, reviewed in chapters two and three, is of men dominating women and interrupting them. However, in my data there are many examples of men who find it hard to get a turn, hard to maintain one, and who sometimes feel excluded from this highly valued commodity of public talk.

Power and status are clearly enacted in this meeting and we are in no doubt as to who is the most senior person. Yet this is masked by a veneer of informality which can be confusing if your own first culture is one where hierarchies are more obvious and deference systems closer to the surface in workplace interactions. After all, we might argue, Steve’s opening remark, “Guys, I’ve got a problem,” comes across as ‘matey’ and informal: quintessentially Australian perhaps. Indeed, cross-cultural studies (see, for example, Trompenaars, 1994 and Hofstede, 1991) consistently locate Australia as one of the most egalitarian countries, where notions of power, status and authority tend to be played down and overt expressions of superiority regarded as distasteful. This preference is captured by expressions particular to Australian English, such as the phrasal verb ‘to be up oneself’. However, as this example shows, hierarchies still exist: they simply operate in more subtle ways. Because Rob’s authority is largely expressed non-verbally, through his cuing of the turn exchanges, it is no less real for that.

It is significant, too, that the shifts in physical alignment, expansive gestures and particular movements such as rubbing his chin which Rob employs to call attention to what he wants, would sit oddly with a female manager. Many of the eloquent non-verbal signals in evidence during this meeting are also distinctively masculine.

This meeting provides an insight into an all-male meeting where the turn-taking dynamics were clearly related to status differences among the participants. In contrast, the next meeting to be examined in this section involved a group of six men who were all at similar levels within a large telecommunications company. Each man manages a technical support section and, once a fortnight, they come together as a management
team, to review staffing targets and work allocation issues across their respective sections. The task of chairing the meeting rotates round the team and on this occasion it falls to David. The other participants are Lawrie, Noel, Joe, Paul and Neil.

Meeting of six male technicians

Example Three

1. David: OK, guys, a good meeting's a quick meeting.
2. Em…Now, Peter wanted me to talk
3. about the upcoming network embargo so…
4. uh, I think uh, we'll speak about that.
5. Anybody got any…any problems?
6. Paul: Once the embargo period hits are we gonna
7. be overstaffed anyway?
8. Neil: No, I don't believe so. There’s not…there’s
9. quite a few people have taken leave. There’s
10. …eh training in the embargo…period {and
11. David: {yeah, but
12. I’d really like to focus on the long haul, get past
13. the embargo and we’ll be into January,
14. business as normal and we’ll still have the same
15. problem. There’s still a certain number of staff
16. here who don’t want to go out to Clayton because
17. of travel reasons.
18. Joe: How many volunteers do you require? Two, three, one?
20. David: Mmm
21. Joe: Just one person.
22. Neil: Like, ideally you know, we’d like to send
23. Lawrie out there because he lives next
24. door but we can’t spare his skills in here.
25. David: {Mmm
26. Paul: {Mmm
27. Joe: {OK
This extract provides an example of the meeting style typical in my recordings of all-male meetings. There is a rapid exchange of turns with few overlaps or interruptions. When these do occur, for example in lines 10 and 11 where David interrupts Neil, they are quickly resolved so that an overall one-speaker-at-a-time system is maintained, as in the Sacks model outlined in Chapter 3. The floor is individually owned and, for the most part, a current speaker is allowed to finish before the next one can legitimately come in. In rapid exchanges of this type, there can be the occasional interruption which, if it occurs at an appropriate point and for an acceptable reason, does not appear to disturb the overall sense of camaraderie evident in such meetings.

At line 8, when Neil answers Paul’s question about the possibility of overstaffing, he has several hesitations but seems to have completed his main point: that overstaffing is unlikely. Therefore, in this context, it is perhaps more acceptable for David to cut in and move the team’s focus to the more substantial issue of the chronic unresolved difficulty they face of working across both an inner city and a suburban (Clayton) site, with few staff wanting to travel out to Clayton. David times his interruption so that it occurs after Neil has completed his point and before he starts an additional one. Moreover, David’s opening ‘Yeah, but’ both acknowledges Neil’s contribution and flags a different point they need to consider. Lastly, David is in the chair and it is part of his legitimate role to keep the team on track through the agenda: in all my data, chairing a meeting provides privileged access to the speaking floor. For these reasons, this small interruption appears to merge with the rapid alternation of turns and does not give any sense of David attempting to dominate the floor inappropriately. However, it could be argued that this staffing problem (which they work through and resolve) is not a confronting or intense issue. Will their turn exchange system still follow the Sacks prescription of one-at-a-time when the topic produces a more heated discussion? The following exchange took place between Joe and Noel when Joe proposed a particular solution to a technical problem and Noel seemed to dispute whether Joe’s solution was feasible.

Example Four

1. Joe: When we did em…PW09, we had to run
2. some scripts for uh…to give customers
3. their KWC category.
4. Noel: Mmm
5. Joe: We were using about 3 overnight in one corral and that managed to...to do it.
6. But I’m not sure how much time you got for that but within three weeks we had it {uh done.
7. Noel: {160
8. You’re talking 160 exchanges
9. Joe: That’s right
10. Noel: You’re talking up to 8 hours which is complete
11. nights and it’s maintenance {x x
12. Joe: {Most probably
13. we’ll be {doing
14. Noel: {So what {-
15. Joe: {the exact same thing.
16. Noel: So 1 PC. So you’re talking {-
17. Joe: {Oh, no. 3 PCs,
18. multiple sessions, 3 sessions on 3 PCs. So we
19. we’re running 9 exchanges a night
20. Noel: So, it doesn’t slow down. Are you talk{ing one
21. Joe: {em
22. Noel: One session?
23. Joe: Well, we had {-
24. Paul: {That’s more detail than
25. probably we want. {If you want
26. Joe: {But anyway…
27. Paul: to work it
28. out between yourselves.

Joe and Noel are seated directly across from each other on opposite sides of the table and this more argumentative interaction involves only these two men. The other four men present, David, Neil, Paul and Lawrie look away and down at their own agenda papers, as if they want no part of it. It emerged later that the topic concerned only the groups led by Joe and Noel. Joe opens the exchange by outlining the strategy he adopted in his team for addressing a technical problem. He is proposing that Noel adopt
this same strategy. Their interaction is characterised by a series of six interruptions but on each occasion the person interrupted by some overlapping talk from the other man, abruptly gives up his turn. In other words, even in a more heated discussion and even if the current speaker has been interrupted, men seem to adhere to the one-at-a-time rule. Overlapping speech appears to be problematic. For example, at line 8, Joe pauses for a moment and uses the filler “uh” to cover this. Noel judges this to be a possible turn exchange point and quickly comes in with “160” as Joe says “uh”. But when Joe adds the word “done” to complete the sentence, Noel holds back and does not speak again until Joe has finished this word. Noel then repeats his “160” but this time embedded in much stronger and more insistent formulation “You’re talking 160 exchanges”, at line 10.

In fact, Noel uses this expression “You’re talking” three times in this short sequence. When this sequence is first viewed, it seems to be a disguised form of question (equivalent to “Do you mean…?”) and, indeed, at line 11, when Joe says “That’s right” he also seems to interpret it as a question requiring an answer. However, Noel’s voice is flat, even monotonous, throughout (there are no high rising terminals), his head is held to one side and he makes small jabbing movements with both hands, across the table towards Joe. These indirect questions come across in a badgering or hectoring way, as if he can see some weakness in the strategy Joe is describing and intends to expose this. However, it is important to note that this impression, based on the recording and my field notes, does not correspond with Joe’s reaction. Joe did not feel pressured or ‘got at’ by Noel. Two factors appear to be relevant: first, it was accepted within the group that Noel had a high level of technical expertise on this particular topic and, along with status, professional expertise gives a speaker more privileges in a meeting. Second, Noel’s personality is known to the group. He has an earnest manner which can come across as abrupt on occasion. In fact, as the men gathered in the room for the start of this meeting, they engaged in some jocular teasing of Noel and his style. It seems Joe was not offended by Noel’s interrogation.

It is noticeable that Joe interjects with brief explanations and clarifying points, such as at line 19 “Oh, no, 3 PCs.” But each time Noel pulls the turn back with his insistent repetitions. The two men do not resolve the matter and it is Paul’s interjection at line 26 that brings it to a halt. In stepping in, Paul seems to have the mandate of the rest of the group who glance quickly at him and shift in their seats as he speaks at line 26. This is
the kind of initiative often left to the chair but, in this meeting, the fact that it is not the chair taking this step is likely to be a function of the equal status shared by the men and the rotating nature of the chair. Authority appears to be dispersed among the team members in a fairly equal way.

Therefore, even in more heated, argumentative phases of a meeting, men tend to preserve the one-at-a-time rule of the Sacks model. In fact, in my data generally, parts of a meeting where there is disagreement also show more interruptive behaviour. But, as in this example, these interruptions are generally functional and, despite any superficial impressions to the contrary, an examination of the whole context tends to show them as supporting the progression of the task. Here, Noel is pushing Joe to expose those details of the strategy which Noel will need to know if he is to trial the same approach with his own work group. His questions provoke sharper definitions.

Much of the literature on interruptions reviewed in Chapter 3, concerns social talk where, it can be argued, the primary motivation is to develop or strengthen the relationship between the participants. While this forms one element within workplace talk, it is not the sole or most important objective in a meeting where people must manage the constraints of limited time, a set agenda and established performance indicators. Task-centred talk conducted within these typical parameters is likely to provoke at least some disagreement on the route to reaching agreement. Indeed, such task-related disagreement tends to be judged positively as a healthy sign of different perspectives enriching the problem-solving process. Within the overall interactional context, segments of interruption do not appear to upset participants or indicate a breakdown of the turn-taking system, unless the purpose behind the interruptive behaviour is interpreted as personally competitive, threatening or not supportive of the task.

The two meetings discussed above underline the importance of considering the whole context within which a particular utterance is located. In the first meeting, chaired by the senior manager, Robert, power was enacted largely in non-verbal ways so that a specific question or response needs to be interpreted within this sub-text of cues and signals. In the second meeting, where the men were at a similar level within their organisation’s hierarchy, again an appreciation of overall context proved essential in understanding the meaning and effect of particular linguistic moves. In his exploration of communicative
practices, Hanks (1995) argues that an individual utterance can convey much more information than that which is encoded semantically since each utterance is, in effect, a combination of semantics plus context. Taken out of the larger interactional context, some instances of linguistic behaviour may support either a conclusion of cooperation or one of competition. Deciding which is the more likely, brings us back to intentions, perceptions and effects.

As we have seen in these extracts, two (or more) men may self-select to speak next and begin their contributions together, but some then drop out so that the conversation can quickly return to the norm of one-at-a-time. All this takes skill, particularly the ability to time the moment correctly, get in quickly and then use strategies such as repetition and increased volume to claim the turn and silence a competitor for the floor.

Meeting of four male project managers
This issue of employing the turn-taking system to silence a meeting participant whose views are not wanted is evident in other data collected in this corpus. In the following meeting there were four men: Ned, the senior manager, and three project leaders, Will, Priya and Simon. Priya has an Indian background. This meeting was filmed in the same company as the Research and Development team described at the beginning of this chapter. However, where Rob and his colleagues design the Environmental Monitoring Units, it is Ned’s section that negotiates contracts with customers and manages the installation process, which can take as long as six months.

This was a tense and heated meeting. At the start, Will, Priya and Simon reported to Ned on the status of their respective projects. Will has successfully completed work for Manchester Airport; Priya is in the middle of a contract for Washington Airport Authority and Ned is at an early stage in a project for Helsinki Airport. After Ned completes his close questioning of their status reports, he makes an unexpected announcement: in future, the two roles of installation engineer and project manager will need to be merged so that the company can meet their new sales target of one project completed per month. This change will increase the three men’s workloads and responsibilities. They try unsuccessfully to dissuade Ned but are finally forced to accept his decision.
Now, near the end of the meeting, Priya raises a problem he has encountered with Washington Airport Authority. They are due to receive delivery of two Environmental Monitoring Units (EMUs) by April but Priya has discovered that the two units designated for Washington have already been given to Manchester, Will’s project. He is worried about not being able to fulfill the U.S. contract by the due date and appeals to Ned for help but none is forthcoming.

Example Five

1. Priya: Uh…Ned, this is something of concern, something we have to deliver to Washington Airport Authority to meet a schedule of mid-April. We’ve assured the customer of two EMUs, along with the weather station. They have to be delivered. But I’m not clear about the resource allocation for the EMUs. I’m getting concerned and I want your help on that.

Ned: OK, Priya, you know that those two EMUs – those resources, finished up in another project. They WERE manufactured but they were needed elsewhere.

Will: =Very much! So? [Will leans back and looks at Priya in challenging way but with a smile on his face]

Priya: That doesn’t address my core issue. In terms of the project {delays-

Ned: {Look, we met about this issue and we decided we needed to allocate these two EMUs on another project. I mean that was a tough call but we had to do that. You still have enough time to recover.

Priya: Well, {I-

Ned: {Do you think that you can?

Priya: If we can resolve all the issues in manufacturing.

Ned: OK. I would handle it two ways. One is to make manufacturing work as fast as possible but also work with the customer and get a bit of an extension. Can you do that?

Priya: I’ll try. I’ll give it a try but it’s a bit difficult. I’ll give it a try. Have {you-

Simon: {It’s precious goods on the market.
Ned: Yes
Will: We really needed them here on that project. This was an old customer and we should perform there.
Ned: But Priya, you were in a similar situation on your last project and we gave you extra human resources to finish it.
Priya: But there are quite a lot of {fa-
Will: {Yes, we did!
Simon: That’s right, Priya.
Priya: But it’s {not-
Ned: {I think you can do it. Talk to manufacturing.

Priya was interrupted five times during this exchange and this effectively isolated him, forcing him to deal with his resource problem alone. He sat looking unhappy and contributed nothing further to the meeting which closed approximately five minutes afterwards. In a turn-taking system predicated on a singly-developed floor, it is unacceptable to simply continue speaking when you are interrupted. This prioritises certain additional skills: how to fend off an interruption and how to seize back your incomplete turn after an interjection. Priya seems to possess neither of these skills and there is the sense of the three other men ganging up against him. He looked tense and upset as he left the room.

Men’s experiences of meetings

At the end of the meeting examined earlier in this chapter, involving Joe, Noel and their four colleagues, I asked the team about their experience of getting a turn to speak in meetings: what was involved and did they find it easy or difficult? Both Joe and Lawrie had strong views on this topic and began to answer at the same moment.

Example Six
Joe: {There might be instances where, OK, you have...
Lawrie: {Well, I x x x
Joe: Sorry, Lawrie, I cut in.
Lawrie: No, you!
The two men exchange eye contact across the table and Lawrie makes a small hand movement towards Joe, confirming Joe as having sole speaking rights. Joe then proceeds with his turn but not before he has repaired any possible ill-feeling by apologising, “Sorry, Lawrie, I cut in.” He also, as we will see, hands the next turn directly back to Lawrie when he has finished, ensuring that Lawrie’s right to speak next is respected. The first rule in the Sacks model (Sacks et al, 1974: 699) is that the current speaker may select the next speaker. So for one of the other four men to seize this particular turn ahead of Lawrie would constitute a violation. In effect, the comments Joe and Lawrie make in response to my questions illuminate both how the Sacks model operates and also the burdens it imposes on many meeting participants. Indeed, the hundreds of people who have viewed this material since its publication in mid-2000 respond strongly to Joe and Lawrie’s remarks (provided below), feeling that the two men capture many of their own dilemmas. Joe gave his thoughts first.

“Where you might have six or seven people in the meeting and four of them might have information to share but the others just want to hold back and see how that goes before they put in their mmm…their thoughts forward. Some of the times you just…you don’t have the chance to cut in because somebody’s a little bit quicker than you, or you’re not sure whether that person is finished and, not to cut in, you actually hold back. But somebody else cuts in in front of you and, basically, it stuffs you up or your thought might end up going out of your brains and you just stay quiet for the rest of the meeting because whatever you had to say has just gone. That’s the critical moment, just like I did to Lawrie. I didn’t think he was going to go, so I said, ‘Well there’s an opening. I’ll cut in there.’ And then I realised that Lawrie had his hand up. Sorry about that! [Joe looks at Lawrie and smiles] But I’m done. Over to you.” [Joe gestures towards Lawrie]

**Culture as a variable**

In understanding Joe Fittipaldi’s comments, it is relevant to take account of the fact that he is a first generation immigrant to Australia from Italy. Joe has worked hard to learn and accommodate to the quite different meeting style encountered in the Australian workplace, where the skill of judging the exact moment when you can appropriately begin your turn is essential, if you are to preserve the general rule of ‘no gap, no overlap’.
In contrast, both social and workplace talk in Italian settings follows what Tannen (1994b: 54) has called a “high involvement style”, characterised by simultaneous or overlapping speech. For example, a U.S. study found that school children with an Italian background can find themselves judged as behaving in an unruly, inconsiderate manner when they are simply employing in the classroom the turn-taking norms of their Italian homes where simultaneous speech is commonplace (Shultz et al, 1982). A study comparing English and Italian conversational patterns likewise found evidence of quite different turn-taking rules in which simultaneous speech and animated discussion appeared to be interrelated in Italian settings (Testa, 1988). In their analysis of Italian meetings, Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (1997: 196) found a high occurrence of overlaps: for example, 251 in a meeting lasting 2 hours 40 minutes. Lastly, Clyne’s (1994: 155) data collected in Melbourne workplaces support these findings, with evidence that employees from an Italian background are among those who take long turns which frequently overlap with the turns of other speakers.

People employing this style in Australian workplace meetings can be judged as abrasive since they seem to be breaching the ‘no gap, no overlap’ rule by violating a current speaker’s territory. A South American male, whose culturally-based turn-taking preference conformed to this high involvement overlapping style, said almost nothing in a meeting I filmed in a Melbourne software company. He explained after the meeting that he had learned to be more subdued because he had been “taken the wrong way”. His supervisor had told him in his most recent appraisal that some team members, particularly the women, had found him “overbearing” and had complained that he interrupted them continuously. Unsure about exactly when or how to come in appropriately, Juan now played safe in meetings by remaining silent.

Joe had to learn when and how to “cut in” and still finds this issue problematic at times. Levinson (1983: 298) points out that the Sacks model prioritises speed: if the current speaker does not select the next speaker (as Joe did for Lawrie), then any other participant may self-select with the first speaker to seize the floor gaining the right to the turn. However, in some cultures (predominantly S.E. Asian), a small pause tends to be allowed between speaking turns in formal contexts as part of a deference politeness system (Scollon and Scollon, 1995). Employees from such societies may wait in vain for
the right moment to appropriate a turn. After an all-male meeting which I filmed in a telecommunications company, I asked Bernie Vanguardia, a first generation immigrant from the Philippines, about his experiences of turn-taking during the six years he has been here,

“When I first came to Australia and when I was already working here, first of all I found it very, very hard to express something or even come into a discussion when I was with my other marketing colleagues. There just wasn’t any gap for you to come in! So I felt very, very threatened and very uncomfortable to express a point of view because I cannot find any space. I cannot seem to find an opportunity to do that. The situation does not allow most of the time.”

Bernie was waiting for a gap or pause to signal the right moment, not realising that he must “cut in” and create the gap for himself.

A final common turn-taking rule in meetings across the Asia-Pacific region involves simply waiting to be addressed. If it is appropriate for you to speak, you will be invited to do so. I have filmed business meetings in Vietnam, for instance, where this rule is evident. The problem is that this is not a regular pattern in Australian meetings and, in my data, was apparent only in those highly regulated meetings where each participant represented an area or function and might, therefore, be formally asked to report on the particular agenda item relevant to that function. This can be the style found in some large committee meetings, working parties or boards. Duc Dung, a migrant from Vietnam and also filmed in Melbourne, vividly described his feeling of being forgotten in meetings and the sense of grievance and injustice this aroused in him.

You sit there. The way you look, the way you speak English with an accent, you be forgotten. Nobody address you, nobody look at you in the eye…Maybe you (Australian-born team members) have to be more caring, look at them more, address them more.

Even after fourteen years in Australia, Duc Dung had not understood that when a current speaker does not choose to hand their turn on to a particular individual, then, put simply, the fastest to the turn can seize it. Instead, he waited to be addressed, the preferred practice in the Vietnamese meetings I filmed. Ironically, when I asked his colleagues if they would consider addressing Duc Dung directly in meetings, thus creating a speaking
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turn for him, they replied that this might be offensive. As a male colleague said, “It might put Duc Dung on the spot. Everyone would turn and look at him. Supposing he had nothing to say? I think that would be a very embarrassing thing to do to someone. Duc Dung’s a good bloke and I wouldn’t want to do that.”

In my data, employees from a South-East Asian background, both male and female, find it difficult to get and maintain a speaking turn and tend to contribute very little to the meetings they attend. Even expert status, which, as we have seen, usually gives a meeting participant special speaking rights, does not appear to offset these cultural barriers. For example, in a meeting of five male technical specialists investigating an equipment breakdown, Viet Tran was the most highly qualified person present. The other men had completed either an apprenticeship or a TAFE Associate Diploma, whereas Viet had a Masters degree in electrical engineering from RMIT. Yet Viet was silent in the meeting, only contributing when the chairperson addressed an occasional question in his direction. Afterwards, over coffee, he told me how complex and demanding he found the turn-taking norms. Like Bernie Vanguardia, whose comments were mentioned earlier, Viet was not able to signal that he had something to say and find a gap where he could come in.

An additional problem for Asian speakers is losing any speaking turn they manage to create or are given. This is experienced as disheartening and people stop trying. Young (1994: 177) has shown that one explanation for this phenomenon is that South-East Asian speakers tend to insert a pause at the juncture between two clauses and this establishes what she terms an “interactional asynchrony” where the pause can be misread as a signal that the turn has been completed. Australian colleagues interpret it as a transition relevance place (TRP), a point identified in the Sacks model (Sacks et al, 1974) as a legitimate place where a new speaker may come in. In my data, native speakers of English also lose their turn if they pause between clauses in this way. However, this relates to personal style and affects some individuals only, whereas South-East Asians as a group tend to face the problem. Clyne (1994) recorded meetings in a range of Melbourne workplaces and his finding that South-East Asian team members tend to be silent is supported by my data. Clyne observes,

On the whole, they (South-East Asians) take the shortest turns and often observe silence. They are generally not successful in appropriating the
turns of others or even maintaining their own turns. However, their turns are the most likely to be appropriated by others (Clyne, 1994: 153).

To people like Viet Tran, Duc Dung, Bernie Vanguardia and Juan Garcia and the many others I have observed in meetings and interviewed about meeting behaviour, it can seem that there is a secret code operating which functions to exclude those not ‘in the know’ from accessing valued speaking opportunities. Such employees can be negatively evaluated as passive or unmotivated when this is not the case at all. Of course, like anything else, once you do understand how the system works it can seem ordinary, obvious and even natural. Here are some comments by two male native speakers of English, from interviews following their filmed meeting.

**Example Seven**
Peter: In normal conversation – like even just us here – you can tell when someone’s finishing a sentence or their idea, and it’s just natural to whiz in with your five cents worth.
Jai: Yeah, as soon as there’s a little pause.
Peter: Yeah, yeah, you just dive in there=
Jai: 

It is quite striking in this footage that when Peter Gibbs asserts that you can tell when someone’s finishing their turn and so it is “just natural” to “whiz in”, his Korean colleague, Chorm Hock Soo, seated to Peter’s right, immediately turns and looks quizzically at Peter. For Chorm, who had contributed nothing at all during the meeting we had just filmed, it was perhaps not so obvious and not so natural.

However, there are examples in my data of men from other cultural backgrounds who are successful in overcoming the disadvantage of their culturally-based turn-taking preferences. Sometimes, an individual’s engaging personality enables him to successfully employ a style which from most native speakers would be judged too direct, or even rude. In the same meeting where I filmed Peter Gibbs and Jai Thomas, another of their colleagues was Vlad Peska, a team member with an Eastern European background. Vlad was much more comfortable with the high involvement overlapping style described earlier since this mirrored the meeting style in his country of origin.
However, he had learned to overcome his difficulty in judging the end of a speaking turn by employing a less common but nonetheless effective technique: an appeal to the chair. He described this in the following terms,

“I address the project manager or the chair and say, ‘Hey Peter, hold it! I want to speak now!’ And then everyone hears that and stops – or you would think – and they do. And then Peter says, ‘Come in now’. So I’ve found you just have to raise a flag loudly and then you jump in.”

Vlad’s warm smile, personal charm and the fact that his colleagues know him well contribute to the success of his turn-appropriation strategy, although without these mitigating factors it might be experienced as peremptory, overbearing or even rude.

Another approach to this issue is described below. In this extract we see again the problem of getting a turn to speak when your own culture-bound norms may not equip you for the particular demands posed by Australian meetings. In an international company with a Sydney base for its Asia-Pacific operations, I filmed a meeting of the project management team responsible for the company’s new initiatives in India. This was a difficult meeting since the agenda concerned the staffing problems the company was experiencing in their new Indian venture. The timelines, targets and other performance indicators the company had set were not being met by the locally employed Indian staff. There were five people attending the meeting, including Greg, a senior executive, and Alan another senior manager slightly below Greg in the hierarchy. The remaining three team members were all at a middle management level. One of these was Rajiv, himself from an Indian background. Rajiv faced a challenge in this meeting. In front of Greg and Alan, he (like his other two middle-level colleagues) wanted to convey an impression of competence and initiative. Yet at the point described in the transcript below, his colleague Chris is recounting how inefficient and unreliable Indians are. Rajiv feels he must speak. He wants to explain the cross-cultural differences between Australian and Indian business practices and yet he cannot risk being seen as ‘one of them’. He decides he must intervene and say something and this will involve taking the floor away from Chris, the current speaker.

Example Eight
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1. Chris: We’re getting everything crammed in at the last minute and that’s a problem because we’re seeing slippage and quality issues and we’re not delivering on time so {perhaps-
2. Rajiv: {Let’s, let’s just stop there for a minute [Rajiv raises his hand in a ‘stop’ gesture and leans in towards the table, looking at Chris and then glancing quickly to Greg and Alan] I take your point.
3. But on the other hand, you can try to find a balance between satisfying the customer and adapting to local practices.
4. …You see where I’m coming from [Rajiv smiles, makes eye contract round the table including with Chris, his hands in a open gesture, palms up] That’s just the style of work that your local employees are used to and there’s an opportunity here for us to harness their approach.

Rajiv succeeds in positioning himself as first and foremost a loyal company employee but one who has useful insider knowledge about Indian work practices. His shift from ‘you’ as in ‘you can try to find a balance’ to the inclusive ‘us’, “there’s an opportunity here for us,” makes his allegiance clear. But it is his turn appropriation strategy which secured him the opportunity to put his point at all. Rajiv uses a combination of linguistic and non-verbal tactics to step in, “Let’s, let’s just stop there for a minute” together with the stop gesture, a forward body movement and capturing the gaze of other team members. In the context, this did not give an impression of rudeness, although, in fact, Rajiv interrupted Chris and prevented him from explaining the solution we can assume was going to come after his “so perhaps-“ at line 4.

Rajiv layers a number of features, one after another. Taken together these soften his interruption helping his intervention to seem judicious and useful, rather than disruptive. He opens at line 5 with ‘let’s just’ which serves to cushion the effect of his first key point
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‘stop’. Adding ‘for a minute’ implies that Rajiv is simply interjecting a piece of useful information and after ‘a minute’, Chris may come back in. This, of course, is not what occurred. Rajiv succeeded in moving the topic in a new direction. His “I take your point. But on the other hand” at lines 9 and 10, adds to the sense of Rajiv providing a balanced perspective. All this is leading up to Rajiv’s key contribution that, if the company is clever, they can harness local practices rather than seek to counter them. However, Rajiv pauses before delivering this message and, as it were, checks his audience: are they receptive, does he have their full attention? He inserts the filler “You see where I’m coming from” and looks round the meeting table, smiling at each person. The rest of the meeting examined the new theme introduced by Rajiv and no one asked Chris what he had been going to propose.

Rajiv’s strategy of a linguistic intervention coupled with a strong non-verbal signal is not typical of Australian-born employees in my data who generally ‘cut in’, ‘jump in’, ‘whizz in’ and ‘dive in’ just as they self-describe. However, Rajiv’s tactic was effective. Although he interrupted the current speaker, he then worked hard to mitigate any impression of rudeness. Native speakers will sometimes employ a phrase or a small gesture to lend additional support to their cutting, jumping, whizzing and diving, so Rajiv does not appear utterly different, just somewhat different. In fact, my data suggest that successful participants from a non-English speaking background frequently employ an interventionist strategy in meetings, as Rajiv does, allied with softeners. The effect is as if the person was saying, “I know I’m interrupting but I can’t seem to find any other way of getting a turn. I apologise and trust that you’ll find my contribution useful, as it isn’t intended to disrupt.”

Over many years of attempting to teach people how to get a speaking turn who, for reasons of personality, gender or culture, find this hard, I have observed that it is Rajiv’s approach that delivers the most positive results for them. Learning the subtle art of ‘cutting in’ at the exact and appropriate moment is much more daunting. Repeatedly in my data, I find the terms listed above such as cut, jump, whiz and dive are employed to describe what it feels like to seize a turn. It is significant that these words all convey a vigorous, athletic and assertive image. Tannen (1986: vii) calls any conversation a “turn-taking game” but, if meetings are a sport, perhaps they are a sport where successful players need to be particularly fit and competitive.
I have quite deliberately chosen to highlight examples from my data of men who, for cultural reasons, find the Sacks model of ‘no gap, no overlap’ quite problematic. Of course, the same issues apply where women from a non-English speaking background participating in Australian workplace meetings are concerned. However, by selecting examples of men I want to emphasise that it is inaccurate to describe organisations generally and meetings in particular as following male interactional norms. It is more exact to specify that it is Anglo-Celt male preferences which are in evidence. Many men do not fit the mould and struggle as a result. Australian workplace data, such as this corpus, will inevitably demonstrate the multiple variables implicated in the linguistic resources individuals draw on when they choose what they feel will be the most appropriate behaviour for them in a given interaction and one dimension of these resources is an individual’s cultural background.

Personality as a variable
As well as gender and culture, personality is frequently a relevant variable. As we saw in the example of Vlad Peska, an unorthodox approach can be effective if an individual has the personal attributes to pull it off. However, what happens to men who, despite being native speakers of English, have a less assertive or less competitive personal style? For them the race to seize a turn can feel daunting or even distasteful.

Earlier Joe Fittipaldi gave his experience of getting a turn to speak and then drew in his colleague, Lawrie MacDonald. Lawrie then recounted the following.

“What I was going to say was that I find this difficult all the time. Where the conversation will be on an issue that I have something to say, I don’t cut in because I wait for what obviously is too long a pause. Then the conversation, whoever has taken the prior opportunity, he directs the conversation in a completely different area, once he’s made his comment. So then the time’s past, and you don’t get to make your comment on the issue. And then, well there’s no point in putting your hand up and saying, ‘Hey, five minutes ago we were talking about this and I have a point to say about it!’ It feels like you haven’t contributed to the meeting when you really did have things you could have contributed. And I
guess you go out a little bit disappointed that you haven’t been able to make a significant contribution.”

The inability to make your contribution is not only a personal loss with personal consequences (such as being evaluated as passive and lacking initiative), it also affects the quality of the meeting itself. As mentioned in the first chapter, Willing’s (1992) research shows that meetings take place largely to solve problems and make decisions. If only two or three out of a possible six or seven people contribute, this has the effect of narrowing a team’s thinking. By interviewing people after recording a meeting where they had participated, I was able to focus in particular on those who had contributed little or nothing. In only two instances I found that this was because they genuinely had nothing to contribute to the topic and so had decided it would be more helpful to the team if they kept silent. The more common explanation was the kind of difficulty Lawrie described.

For example, in a project management team meeting which I filmed for over an hour and a half, I noted that two men, Bernard and Tony, contributed nothing at all. It emerged that Bernard had chosen to remain silent as a type of ‘protest statement’. He believed his views on the direction their project was taking had previously been marginalised and so he now felt alienated from the rest of the team. The ‘no gap, no overlap’, self-selecting turn-taking style the team employed obscured this serious problem in their midst. For instance, although the team was not aware of it, Bernard was likely to unintentionally sabotage their action plan because he did not support it.

Tony’s situation was even more difficult. He found getting a turn to speak a continual challenge because of his reserved, thoughtful, slightly introverted personal style. He tended to wait too long before trying to come in and then missed out on the chance to share his views: the same problem Lawrie described in a different meeting. In addition, Tony had a habit of pausing at the end of a thought unit so that, when he did speak, he tended to lose his turn before managing to complete his point. Here is an example of Tony’s measured style and it is relevant to note that this turn had been allocated to him and also that on this particular occasion the team had agreed not to interrupt Tony.

Example Nine
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“I’m another one who’s in two minds! Em…There is the the two issues – the project and the CEO Leaders Program…Em…From…the point of view of the project I…probably would lean towards closing it off…but…as far as the process used, I think we should perhaps use the project as a means of selling…the process…Em…because that’s…sort of the learning…that I’ve I’ve got out of that part of the CEO Leaders Program – was that process. I’ve developed a bit of of faith in the process…Em and I think it could be a lot of value to the organisation so I’d…probably like to see us…at least…selling the process.”

It took Tony sixty-six seconds to deliver his point. This slow rate of speech is exacerbated by his repetitions, hesitations and pauses (sixteen in all). There is little doubt that it was only because the team had suspended their normal meeting procedure that Tony was able to complete his contribution, yet it was this contribution that set the team off on a more productive line of thinking. Under usual meeting procedures, his slow delivery was perhaps found irritating so that when he arrived at one of his inter-clause pauses, others could choose to view this as a possible turn exchange point (a TRP in the Sacks model) and feel justified in cutting in. As Tony himself commented a little ruefully, in the typical Australian meeting, “The loud will always tend to win out whether they’re right or wrong.” This is not only unfair, it is also inefficient.

Conclusion

Therefore, the data in this corpus concerning men’s styles and men’s experiences present a more complex picture than has been outlined in existing research, much of which has focused on social settings. The workplace meetings filmed for this study show evidence of power being enacted both linguistically and non-verbally, of interruptive behaviour, competition for the floor and the silencing of low status individuals. But there is also evidence that interruptions are not necessarily dysfunctional or disruptive. In fact, many of these features can be not only supportive of the meeting’s task but may even be inevitable in problem-solving discourse, where initial disagreement can function to move the discussion towards eventual agreement. Significantly, none of these behaviours causes a breakdown in the essential elements of the Sacks model, where one speaker occupies the floor at a time and participants endeavour to abide by the ‘no gap, no overlap’ rule.
It is also apparent that not all men are comfortable with this turn-taking system or handle it successfully. It seems particularly suited to assertive, Anglo-Celtic males and it is this group who appear to dominate the talk in men-only meetings: personality and culture are variables which appear to co-vary with gender in critical ways. A number of researchers have commented on the fact that men’s sense of who they are tends to have strong links to the public sphere (see for example, Coates, 2003: 117). Indeed, David Morgan (1992: 77) terms the workplace a ‘crucible’, out of which the male identity is forged and through which it is given shape and meaning. In this context, it can be particularly important to be able to cut in, be heard and establish an authoritative presence in the team. Those unable to secure or sustain a valued speaking turn in this competitive environment can feel sidelined. Is it the same for women? The next chapter continues this exploration of single sex meetings by examining women-only workplace conversation.
Chapter 6
Data analysis: women only meetings, women's style and women's experiences

Overview of chapter
Before I show any footage of women-only meetings to those attending a course or a conference, I always ask the men present what they think they are going to see. What sort of approaches to running a meeting do they predict I would have caught on camera and what sort of effect do they imagine these approaches would have? There is never any hesitation or doubt and the answers to my questions generally come in a rush of voices. The agenda will get scant attention as the women engage in personal talk and gossiping exchanges. It will be hard to follow their long-winded and inconclusive arguments. The women will not pay attention to each other and just butt in when they feel like it. Small sub-groups or pairs of particular friends will enjoy a chat while others, in vain, try to get the meeting back on track.

The men’s answers tend to convey a fairly negative view of their female colleagues’ competence but, when I point this out and ask whether this negative view is based on direct, personal experience, most of the men accept that they have not actually seen those behaviours in workplace meetings. They assert that their own female colleagues (sitting silently alongside them during this exchange) are talented and highly professional. However, the men imagine that the women they know would not behave quite so professionally if there were no men present. The presence of men, they feel, makes the difference. While it would be false to claim that all men to whom I have posed these questions respond in this way, it is worth noting two things. First, those who have a different opinion of how women may conduct meetings in the absence of men say nothing. In contrast, those who tend to hold the traditional stereotype of women as personable, indirect but not results-oriented seem to feel no embarrassment in stating their views.

In other words, it appears that the traditional dichotomising of male and female styles constitutes an enduring frame of reference which can be activated at will. Indeed, in a recent study of New Zealand workplaces (Holmes and Stubbes, 2003:574), a table is provided, summarising some of the most widely cited features of those male and female styles and the point is made that, while this kind of polarised list is crude, simplistic,
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misleading and has been severely criticised by researchers, nevertheless it persists. One difficulty is that, beneath the exaggerations, there are patterns which seem to have been confirmed by numerous studies: women are collaborative and men are competitive; women focus on people and men think about the task; women make minor contributions in public domains and men dominate. In addition, the two styles are not seen as ‘different but equal’ but, as noted in Chapter 2, it is the style associated with men which tends to be valued more highly. Since men have dominated the public sphere until very recently (and still do in many Australian settings) it is their preferred style which has come to be accepted as the workplace norm (Tannen, 1994b:24).

In much of this research on men and women, the linguistic features associated with each gender are characterised as expressing different domains of expertise. Men’s interests and skills, we are told, equip them to achieve in the public sphere of work and professional endeavour. In contrast, it is claimed that women’s values and concerns are better suited to the private spheres of home or family. For instance, Holmes (1995:37) uses this rationale to explain the different amounts of talk men and women contribute in public contexts. Women value talk in intimate situations, she states, more than they value contributing in formal settings and so their discomfort leads them to speak less. “Each gender may be contributing more in the situations in which they are most comfortable.”

Coates (1998:229) shares this view of men and women having developed different kinds of expertise, appropriate to the domains within which each has traditionally excelled. She locates women in the private sphere and demonstrates that the typical features of their conversational style “can be explained by direct reference to the functions of such interaction [ie private or intimate], that is the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, the reaffirming and strengthening of friendship.”

This assessment of women’s talk has implications for the data analysis of women-only meetings, the focus of this chapter. Essentially, the view of both male and female training course participants and of many academic researchers is that women’s preferred style may be inappropriate (and, therefore, ineffective) in task-centred workplace meetings. In other words, power and status differences between men and women may prove to be a distraction when seeking to explain what happens in
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Australian workplace meetings: the real problem might be that most women are employing strategies which, while they may be effective around the dinner table or with a group of friends, are simply not capable of delivering business outcomes. Indeed, this is the rationale driving much of the assertiveness training industry which problematises women’s style as ineffective and in need of remediation, if women are to succeed in professional life.

However, these generalisations tend to be based on studies of all-female social conversations, together with mixed-gender talk in more formal settings. Findings from women’s informal friendship groups are used to explain the disparities in amount of talk recorded between men and women in the quite different context of the workplace. Clearly, this is unsatisfactory. A key, intervening step is missing from the investigation: do women, in workplace meetings where there are no men, employ the discourse features that researchers, such as Holmes and Coates, have noted in their social talk? If they do, does this style support or hinder achieving workplace goals in typical problem-solving meetings? Does the function of their talk appear to be directed only towards affirming relationships or can women also achieve task-related goals?

To explore the answers to these questions, the present study includes video recordings of women-only meetings. This helps to avoid the conflation of women’s style in mixed-interactions with what may or may not be their style in the absence of men. Moreover, investigating the two issues separately may assist in understanding what precisely happens when men and women work side by side (the theme of Chapter 7).

The data analysis below begins by examining the linguistic strategies employed by women in a small, close-knit team within a government department, as they work through the problems facing them, resulting from legislative changes at the Commonwealth level. This meeting is characterised by a low-key, collaborative approach where many of the features Coates associates with women’s social talk, such as minimal responses and simultaneous speech, are to be found but demonstrated here in the service of the task, as well as the relationships.

The same themes are then extended into an analysis of a quite different type of women-only meeting: a group of eleven senior managers, representing each state and territory.
where their company has branches. These women are somewhat younger than most of those in the first meeting and they work within a large corporate sector organisation which is known for its competitive culture. How women’s style is played out in this significantly different setting, and to what effect, are explored. The comments of these and other women filmed in meetings are drawn in to enrich the interpretation of the evidence presented. By including women’s experiences, reactions and intentions as they describe these themselves, the conclusions drawn from the data can be checked and validated.

The data suggest both that women’s typical style is, in fact, well-suited to workplace problem-solving discourse and also that women’s linguistic strategies are influenced by organisational concerns, for example the generic determinants of the business meeting as an activity type. A balancing of task and relationship, of ‘report’ and ‘rapport’ (Tannen, 1990a:74) emerges as a characteristic of women-only workplace interactions. In other words, the style the women employ appears to serve them well in achieving their business goals.

In each meeting, the person in the chair is the most senior. This provides the opportunity to examine how status and authority are managed within what seems to be a collaborative frame. The chapter also includes reference to women’s behaviour and linguistic choices in meetings where culture is a significant variable. Do women from different cultural backgrounds find it easier to find common ground because of their shared gender or does any gender-based solidarity break down in the face of cultural differences?

**Meeting of six female public servants**

This first meeting takes place in a large Commonwealth Government agency, with offices around the country and a focus on client service delivery. Those participating in the meeting are responsible for handling more complex complaints against the agency, for example, where a breach of legal process may have occurred or where a client has taken their allegation of unfair treatment to the Commonwealth Ombudsman’s office. Responding to complaints of this nature often involves reviewing the current policy or procedure which may have contributed to the problem and proposing ways of avoiding a similar issue in the future. The team, therefore, has quite wide-ranging duties at a senior
level and considerable influence within the agency. There are six women in the team: Robyn (the most senior), Kath, Fran, Libby, Michelle and Kirsten. Robyn and Kath are both in their fifties; Fran is in her late forties; Libby is about thirty-five, while Michelle and Kirsten are in their late twenties.

Robyn is a softly-spoken person with a low-key style as a manager. At this point, it is worth providing a rationale for opening a discussion of women’s communication style in the Australian workplace by focussing on a team where the team leader could be ‘typecast’ as ‘feminine’, in the traditional sense. If I had entered organisations with the aim of locating women who were regarded by their peers as assertive, somewhat masculine in style, ‘one of the boys’ (a ‘blokey’ woman, in other words), then any success such a woman had could be put down to her capacity to provide a reasonable approximation of the previously discussed male workplace norm. The result would be to affirm that norm as the ‘gold standard’ for Australian communicative competence. Instead, by opening this discussion with a manager such as Robyn who, on the face of it, seems to conform to stereotypes of rather demure femininity, it may be possible to explore the features and effects of that style in a professional context. Women as a group are diverse and their individual styles can be seen as ranging along a continuum from stereotypically feminine at one end to stereotypically masculine at the other.

Robyn, as the most senior person, chairs the meeting and sets an informal, relaxed tone from the outset. Significantly, her opening remarks (1.5 minutes in length) constitute her longest speaking turn during the entire meeting. Robyn does not exercise the traditional privilege of the chair and dominate the talking time, although, as will be shown, she ‘dominates’ nevertheless. Her voice is clear but soft, and, as she speaks, she makes eye contact with her team members and smiles at them. They, in turn, are very attentive to her.

**Example 1**
1. Robyn: “I’ve just got a couple of things for today.
2. You’re probably aware, I think, that we had a meeting with people from
3. the Ombudsman’s office and that was
4. really very constructive. I think it really
6. gave us the chance to talk about 
7. what we’d really find useful to get from 
8. them. So that proved very productive for us.

In this opening, there is immediate evidence of some of the features which characterise 
women’s talk in general, and women-only meetings in particular, in the corpus of data 
collected for the present study. These features are essentially linguistic forms which 
have the effect of playing down the individual and maximising the role of the group to 
create a shared experience. Terms such as “just” (line 1) and “I think” (lines 1 and 5) and 
“probably” (line 2) are defined by linguists as ‘epistemic modal forms’ (see, for example, 
Coates, 1998:245; Holmes 1995:111). Strictly speaking, such forms indicate the limits of 
a speaker’s certainty or confidence in what they are saying, as in a statement such as: 
“It was just getting dark, I think”. In, for instance, a courtroom setting this would convey a 
tentative impression and cast doubt on the proposition. Some researchers have claimed 
that women’s use of these linguistic devices exposes them to a charge of coming across 
as weak or passive (Lakoff 1975). However, any linguistic feature is capable of multi- 
functions and the key to determining the function on a particular occasion is to examine 
its overall effect. Here Robyn immediately situates this meeting as informal and 
collaborative. She is the most senior person present and, as such, is chairing the 
meeting but it is clear she does not intend to take a directive approach to the agenda. 
Her use of epistemic modal forms has the effect of making space for her colleagues, 
their views and solutions. This is reinforced throughout her opening remarks, as she 
foreshadows later agenda items with small comments such as these: “You might like to 
say another word about it, Fran… or not?” At this point Robyn smiles at Fran. “So we’ll 
proceed on with that this week, if that’s OK?” Questions of this type provoke 
paralinguistic cues (for instance, as in this case, smiles and nods) and minimal 
responses (again as here, ‘mm’ and ‘yeah’). The frame employed is one of a ‘community 
of practice’ (Holmes, 2003:582). The women are engaged in a joint enterprise which will 
involve all members drawing on their shared repertoire. Even in the typically solo 
performance of the chair’s opening remarks, collaboration and involvement are 
promoted by means of this style.

Holmes (2000:5) points out that the opening of a meeting is a ‘crucial juncture’, where 
the chair establishes their control and ensures that participants orient to their authority.
While these are obviously important practical functions, there is also a more subtle, but equally vital, task the chair accomplishes through the linguistic and paralinguistic features they select from their repertoire. They set the scene, or frame, for the sort of meeting they want this to be. In the data collected for this study, the opening move in each meeting proved pivotal in understanding the group dynamics which followed. I began to see this as the ‘interactive climate’ since, like the weather, it refers to the general environment within which a particular event will unfold. This theme will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 7. In the case of this meeting, Robyn signals that she wants her team members to feel free to contribute in a non-competitive way.

Example 2

1. Robyn {We’ll need to review the complaints about this
2. Kirsten {yeah
3. Robyn {I mean everything so far this
4. Fran {this year
5. Robyn {Yeah. I think it’ll help us set up a better process
6. Michelle {mm
7. Robyn {Well, improve the way we manage
8. Fran {manage the relationships=
9. Robyn = Absolutely. The relationships with all our stakeholders, including the Ombudsman’s office.

In this extract, Robyn introduces an issue from the agenda concerning the need to review their log of complaints about how their agency has been handling changes to carers’ allowances. Although it is Robyn who puts the matter before the meeting, Kirsten, Fran and Michelle (the quietest team member) all contribute supportive minimal responses, or back channels. Clearly Robyn does not experience these as interruptions or competitive attempts to seize the floor, despite the fact that they occur before she has completed her point. In fact, they are mostly located at points where Robyn draws a breath between units of thought. Accomplishing this requires some finesse on the part of a listener, since close attention must be paid (albeit unconsciously) to a speaker’s intonation so that the timing of the ‘mm’ or ‘yeah’ is non-intrusive. In addition, the small overlaps and repetitions at lines 4 and 8 constitute another version of supportive feedback for the current speaker. This shadowing demonstrates rapport and lets Robyn
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know the team concurs with her thinking on the need to review the current unsatisfactory procedure. Such features have the effect of moving the discussion along with everyone’s involvement. Clearly this is a team where the members are able to work smoothly together.

In the case of a more reserved person, such as Michelle, this collaboratively constructed floor allows her to make her presence felt in small, continuous ways throughout the duration of the meeting, by means of minimal responses, laughter and exchanges of non-verbal signals such as smiles, nods and sighs. Robyn also directly draws team members in – something all female chairs in this study do. For example, she says: “That was all from me but, Libby, you had a couple of issues you wanted to raise?” Later she turns to Fran: “Fran, would you like to raise something?” She also draws Michelle into the discussion, again with a rising intonation laid over a statement (high rising terminal): “Michelle, you’re off to Melbourne to look at the new appeals processes?”

This noticing of team members and ensuring they are all involved in the team’s discussion, is a characteristic many women singled out in their comments about women-only meetings and women’s chairing style. Michelle herself values this about Robyn and made the following comment in an interview recorded after the meeting:

“I know if I haven’t spoken much, Robyn will turn to me before that topic is closed off and ask if I want to say something. I really appreciate that – it takes the pressure off, as I don’t like to put myself forward.”

A woman in a different organisation expressed a similar view:

“If somebody hasn’t participated, one of the women’s likely to say, ‘Oh, Adrienne, what do you think about that. And you don’t find that quite so much in an all male meeting.”

Example 3

1. Robyn: Fran, would you like to raise something?
2. Fran: Yes, I had a query about carers’ allowances.
3. What level of responsibility does Centrelink have? We’ll see what comes of that but
4. it could open up a fairly huge, contentious
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6. area for us…It’s a bit difficult to know
7. where the responsibility lies in what we
8. did =
9. Robyn: = {Yes, that’s right
10. Kirsten: {Yes
11. Robyn: It’s raising those issues where there’s a
12. change in the nature of
13. Fran: {of our duty of care =
14. Robyn: = Yes, of the nature of our service. It’s
15. a new business for us. Staff will need to
16. know. It’s very demanding for them.
17. Fran: Absolutely. So it’ll be interesting to see the
18. outcomes of this case from Melbourne.

[Whole group laughter apparently at mention of Melbourne colleagues, then
overlapping talk sequence, with 4 or 5 voices at once, until Robyn draws the item
to a close]
19. Robyn: We’ll need to work with the Ombudsman’s
20. office on that one and do an analysis of
21. cases and complaints coming up.

Robyn picks up from Fran’s shift of body position that she would like to speak next. One
benefit of studying filmed data is that is it possible to note how listeners indicate their
interest in speaking next. A sensitive chair notices body language signals such as a
team member moving forward, an intake of breath, a small hand movement or an
attempt to make eye contact with either the chair or the current speaker. In this case,
Fran’s movement is quite small but Robyn responds and draws her in smoothly,
enabling Fran to raise the issue of Centrelink’s responsibility in relation to the new
allowances and entitlements.

At line 9, Robyn comes in quickly at the end of Fran’s point and Kirsten overlaps with her
briefly. Then Robyn expands what she wants to say, pointing out that there is a change
in the nature of the agency’s service. In fact, she pauses momentarily on the word ‘of’,
causing Fran to come in at line 13 to finish her sentence for her, “of our duty of care.”
But it is not the point Robyn wanted to make and this becomes clear at line 14 when she
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completes her actual sentence. It is interesting to note that, rather than point out Fran’s mistake (for example, by saying ‘no’, instead of ‘yes’ at line 14), Robyn continues smoothly as if this slight misunderstanding had not occurred. She avoids any loss of face for Fran.

After line 18, there is a sequence of talk where multiple speakers overlap in an energetic way and there is a great deal of laughter. This phenomenon characterises all the women-only meetings I recorded and supports Coates (1997) research in women-only social conversation, where she also notes such sequences of what she calls ‘all together now’ talk occurring at intervals. In effect, the Sacks model of a single speaker floor regularly gives way to a floor where several speakers explore the topic under discussion in a collaborative fashion. However, in striking contrast with the data discussed in Chapter 5, there appears to be no sense of discomfort, violation or competition. There is no evidence that the women are attempting to adhere to a ‘one-at-a-time’ rule, fail, with the meeting descending into a period of anarchy. Likewise, there is no evidence of individual team members raising their voices in a struggle to be heard or in a effort to talk down their colleagues and so seize the floor. On the contrary, the laughter suggests positive rapport and a joint decision to engage in talk where there is no particular ‘owner’ of a point.

At such times (as in this case), it can be very challenging for the researcher to arrive at a transcript where each individual voice is teased out. Coates (1998:242) remarks on this difficulty but also points out that the actual recording is needed to properly convey the impression of involvement and mutual understanding during these sequences. “Without providing an audio-tape, it is hard to describe the quality of such passages.” The Sacks model provides no reference point for talk of this kind.

Again it is typical in the data collected of women-only meetings, that the chair is ‘in tune with’ this way of working, understands what the women’s collective view is and senses just when to draw this out, closing off the sequence. This is what Robyn does at line 19: “We’ll need to work with the Ombudsman’s office on that one and do an analysis of cases and complaints coming up.” The overlapping sequence has served its purpose and the floor reverts to a single speaker, as Robyn signals where the team is up to in its discussion. This summarising and clarifying role is an important part of the chair’s
authority and all the female chairs filmed during this study had no difficulty in exercising their authority by keeping the meeting on track. In other words, the overall structure of women-only meetings follows a linear progression through the agenda items, with the chair as director and facilitator, in much the same way as in the men-only meetings. The talk is purposeful and the meeting’s objective is held clearly in view.

**Example 4**

1. Fran: I wonder if there's anything we can
2. do to be more proactive in trying to identify
3. an area before we get complaints coming
4. in?
5. Robyn: {Well, we can aim at that!
6. Michelle: {Mmm
7. Kath: {If nothing goes wrong, there's no compensation.
8. Kirsten: {Sometimes we just don't know.
9. Libby: {Just celebrate if there are no complaints!
10. Fran: {Yes I suppose so!
    [laughter, animated discussion, unintelligible overlapping talk]
11. Robyn: Just on another tack. Libby raised
12. the other day how we deal with each
13. other’s urgent issues if one of us is
14. away.

In Example 4, the women enjoy a light-hearted moment thinking about how pleasant it would be to have no complaints to handle and how this can scarcely be imagined. Shared laughter has been well-documented as a feature of women’s social talk and this study demonstrates that women also laugh frequently in Australian workplace meetings, even in meetings where the problems facing a team are much more serious than those which formed the agenda of Robyn’s team in this meeting. The laughter promotes a sense of solidarity and group identity. It also gives women-only meetings a high energy and fast pace. Men watching such sequences often wonder what the joke was and strive to work out what was so amusing. However, in showing these data in courses and at conferences for four years now, no woman has tried to locate a joke with a punch line. It seems they recognise this type of behaviour. Like minimal responses, outbursts of
laughter appear to occur more often when the floor is shared. It seems that, through laughing, women demonstrate their continued involvement, even if they do not have a particular point to contribute at that moment. This has also been noted by Coates in women’s social talk: “Minimal responses and laughter signal that participants are present in the shared floor, even if they are not saying anything substantive” (Coates 1997:118).

However, as well as these features typically found in their social conversation, Australian women in workplace meetings also draw on strategies associated more with professional discourse. Robyn again steps in, exerting her authority, and closes off the sequence, redirecting their attention at line 14: “just on another tack.” She then introduces the next item on the agenda, concerning the need to better manage team members’ absences on inter-state trips. Robyn may have a somewhat ‘feminine’, understated style but there is no doubt that she is in charge.

Example 5

1. Kath: The current system we’ve got for appeals and sort of keeping track where our cases are at isn’t working. We want everyone to have access to the system Libby and I use. So I want to look at developing a data base. Then we can note {where the file’s at
2. Libby: {what’s happening with it
3. Fran: {notes from calls
4. Michelle: {….and meetings
5. Kirsten: {who we’ve referred them to
6. Kath: Yeah, yeah. We can keep a detailed history of the cases to refer to later on.
7. Robyn: That’d be really handy. There are always times when people are not here, so one of us could just tap in quickly.

This last example drawn from the same meeting, shows the team working out a better system for keeping track of cases under review. This matter is complex since agency staff around the country may be involved, as well as legal counsel in another state. The
extract shows typical features of this meeting; sequences of overlapping talk as the women collaborate in exploring an idea; someone other than the chair (in this instance, Kath) dominating the talking time and Robyn stepping in to ratify the decision taken by the team (at line 13).

The extract also provides a good example of the chatty, even domestic, style Robyn employs. She does not say the proposed system would be ‘useful’, ‘efficient’ or ‘effective’. Instead, she asserts, “That’d be really handy.” Throughout the meeting Robyn’s language has this quality, for instance, her opening comments contain five examples of the word “really” during one and a half minutes. This adds to the sense that the meeting has a feminine, almost domestic tone.

All this raises the question of what persona women are seeking to establish in meetings of this kind by drawing on such linguistic strategies. Authority is enacted in a low-key way, where a balance appears to be sought between collaboration and control, connection and status. Robyn effectively manages the meeting and is clearly seen as the leader by her team. Yet her approach may not be so easily recognised as authoritative by those whose image of a leader is of someone who takes charge in more overt or direct ways. Nevertheless, she is effective in a setting where others share her style and, indeed, appear to value it. Essentially, she exercises her authority by using linguistic strategies that allow her to create and maintain a collaborative meeting frame.

It could be argued that Robyn is ‘motherly’ towards her team. Categorising female managers as maternal or ‘mother-hens’ is, I found, common. It can be a way of ‘damning with faint praise’, since even when someone has a positive relationship with their mother, they rarely want to be managed by her in their professional lives. The ‘leader as mother’ was the conclusion Wodak (1995) drew in her study of three female school principals. She noted the way they minimised status differences by appealing to equality and consensus as they addressed their staff. She evaluated them as drawing on the authoritative strategies of motherhood. In light of Wodak’s study, I asked twelve senior executive women (who were also mothers) in interviews filmed for this research, to what extent they felt they drew on the way they managed their children as a style of managing their staff at work. They tended to find this idea amusing: with their children, they felt they were more often than not ‘benevolent dictators’ but with their staff they sought a
more equal relationship. In support of their reaction, the categorisation of women’s low
key leadership style being maternal has also been challenged in recently published
research by Kendall (2003). She wanted to find out if the cliché was true: do female
managers behave at work the same way they do at home with their children? She
tracked female leaders who were also mothers and compared how they construct their
authority at work and at home.

She found that women tend to employ a quite explicit authority in their role as mothers,
giving direct orders and generally ensuring there is a clear status difference between
themselves and their children. In sharp contrast, the same women create what Kendall
(2003:620) terms a “benevolent demeanour” of authority at work, downplaying status
differences and mitigating their directives. In other words, it may be misleading to claim
that women managers, such as Robyn, are doing no more than being ‘motherly’. In their
actual role as mothers, they appear to adopt what might, to use current managerial
jargon, be described as the kind of ‘command and control’ style they eschew at work.
This begs the question: if women like Robyn are not simply transferring a maternal
authority style from the home to the workplace, how can we position what they do? It
seems that women managers choose (consciously or unconsciously) to enact a
significantly more affiliative style in the workplace than they adopt in other, more
personal areas of their lives. They appear to experience advantages in minimising status
differences between themselves and their staff, but fewer, if any, advantages in
behaving this way with their children.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, a number of studies suggest that women find overlapping
talk, of the kind described in the meeting of Robyn’s team, congenial. Edelsky’s (1981)
analysis of university faculty meetings shows the women speak as much as men in
collaboratively developed floors, although men dominate the talk in the more
competitive, singly-developed floors. She observes that “being on the same wave length
was inferred from long overlapping turns, each of which simultaneously developed the
same entire idea or answered the same question and where neither turn yielded to the
floor” (Edelsky 1981:391).

This sense of women’s comfort in situations where two or more speakers are free to
chime in is supported by this corpus of data. A meeting of middle managers and
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supervisors in a Sydney manufacturing company was filmed, where the majority of team members were first generation immigrants to Australia from cultures known to favour what linguists call a “high-involvement style”, marked by supportive, overlapping talk. This style is typically found, for example, in Eastern Europe, South America and Mediterranean countries, such as Italy and Greece (Tannen 1994:73).

After each agenda item has been formally introduced by Aytek Yilmaz, the Turkish-born senior engineer in the chair, as many as seven team members speak at once, contributing their opinions in what seems at first to be, from a conventional viewpoint, a tumult of sound. But the fact that they are simultaneously speaking and listening is demonstrated by their responses to each other within the flow of talk, and the team’s ability to reach a consensus-based conclusion to close off each agenda item. After one such sequence of simultaneous speech, Aytek sums up, “OK, Maria will look into it and report back next week. Now, point eight: the trial of 50 millimetre cones in the vibrator machine to reduce re-working. How is it going, Arvin?” As noted with Robyn’s team, chairing a meeting where there is a collaborative floor requires particular focus and skills. Like Robyn, Aytek listens intently, then articulates the decision the team has arrived at. No vote is necessary since all views have been aired and consensus reached progressively. It is perhaps significant that the only two native speakers of English in this particular team were both women, one Australian and the other from New Zealand. At the end of this meeting, which had been run in a very different way from others I had observed in the company (where the Sacks model of ‘no gap, no overlap’ was evident), I asked Carol and Janet what they made of it. They both stated that, while they were members of a number of a different teams, it was in these meetings with immigrant colleagues and run by Aytek, where they spoke up most. Janet commented, “I just feel sort of comfortable in these meetings. You can say what you want. Everybody talks. They’re very lively and noisy. You don’t hold back if you’ve got something on your mind.”

In other meetings, it seemed, they found it demanding to get their timing right in order to come in straightaway at the end of a previous speaker’s turn, whereas in the meeting I filmed, timing was not a skill required to the same extent. Those with an opinion, chimed in, in a free-for-all way. Spontaneity rather than a respect for individual autonomy was valued. The women felt this encouraged cooperation.
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However, it is not always the case that cultural and gender-based preferences in communicative styles blend so conveniently. Again in Sydney, I filmed a meeting between a company’s grievance officer and an engineer who has come to seek help with a problem she is experiencing in her team. Both the grievance officer (Louise) and the engineer (Rama) are female and both in their early thirties. But in their case, any solidarity that their shared gender and generation might offer is overshadowed by significant differences in assumptions and expectations which they bring to the interaction, based on their different cultures. Louise was born in Australia, while Rama is a recently arrived migrant from India, who feels she has been employed well below her proper professional level and wants Louise to help resolve this problem.

Rama brings an interpretive frame to the interaction in which a person in Louise’s role uses their power to intervene personally and make something happen. “Could you just do something for me in that regard please?” she asks Louise several times in what begins to sound like a mournful refrain. But Louise is operating from a view of the situation where notions of ‘empowerment’ and ‘one rule for all’ dominate. She wants Rama to follow the company’s standard procedure in an independent way. “It’s all explained here in the brochure,” she reassures Rama – only Rama does not even glance at the document. Louise wants her to deal with the manager alone. Louise will advise and encourage her but, in the end, wants Rama to be ‘empowered’ to act independently. Rama finds this proposal mystifying, why won’t Louise just fix the problem? It is as if Rama is on one side of a river. Success in an individualistic, competitive workplace lies on the other side. Louise may wish to play a role in assisting Rama to cross this river. But there is no bridge and their meeting ends unsatisfactorily, with Rama beginning to wonder if Louise is biased against her.

From our knowledge and experience, we make assumptions about how an interaction is structured, how to behave within it and how we expect others to behave. For example, as in Rama’s situation, we choose what we believe to be the most appropriate communicative strategy, if we want to influence someone to assist us. If the parties do not share the same interpretative frame, they can end up at cross purposes. After her meeting with Louise, Rama sums up her feeling about what has happened, “Totally I am very much disappointed.”
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The richness and diversity of data gathered for this study reflects the diversity of today’s Australian workplace. As noted earlier, this allows any analysis of gender to include at least some reference to other variables, such as culture, personality or professional background, which may co-vary with gender in a given situation. Indeed, as is clear in this discussion of the manufacturing team and of the unsuccessful meeting between Rama and Louise, sometimes gender and culture can work together surprisingly smoothly but sometimes a shared gender is not enough to overcome differences whose origin is located at the deep level of cultural value systems.

Meetings of women-only team in a national bank

The participants in this meeting are eleven women at a senior level in a large bank with branches in towns and cities across Australia. From around the country, the women come together regularly during the year to design and implement the bank’s ‘women in business’ strategy. The first phase of this project was directed towards convincing internal stakeholders of the value of such an initiative and securing executive champions. The women have achieved this objective and the purpose of the meeting I filmed was to focus their energies more sharply now on external marketing. For this reason, a female colleague with a marketing role in the company has joined the team.

The profile of those attending the meeting differs from that of the women in Robyn’s team in a number of important ways. First, their average age is lower. The women in this team are all in their thirties. This point is significant in a country such as Australia where equal opportunity gains in many arenas came late. For instance, these women would find it extraordinary to imagine an Australia where women could be asked to resign their permanent positions on marriage or that, when socialising, women would sit in car parks while their male partners went into hotels from which all females were barred. Australian women of the generation represented by this team have, to some extent, taken for granted the hard-won gains secured by their mothers and aunts (Megalogenis, 2003).

These women are all what might be termed ‘high fliers’ or ‘high potential employees’. They were academically successful, entered the financial sector as graduates and quickly made their mark. They are successful, confident and ambitious. The project leader, Amanda, chairs the meeting and her manner is quite different from the low-key, softly-spoken, traditionally ‘feminine’ demeanour of Robyn. Amanda has a strong and
definite presence. She is an accomplished public speaker and has already written a successful book on financial planning. There is no doubt that Amanda is the team leader: not only does she steer the meeting skilfully through the agenda but, as is the chair’s privilege, she dominates the overall talking time.

Visually, the team makes a certain statement too. Each woman is dressed elegantly and most are wearing expensive suits. However, only a few of them have opted for the female version of the accepted male corporate uniform: the grey or navy pinstripe suit with a light-coloured shirt. There is colour in the room, something that is striking after filming so many meetings where every person, male or female, seems to have taken some trouble to depersonalise their appearance. Amanda, for instance, wears a vivid lime-green jacket and the woman on her left wears a well-cut cream suit which would not be out of place at a wedding. All the women wear make-up and each has a different hairstyle. The overall impression is that these women, far from trying to blend in and approximate men, relish being women. This is not a trivial point in the context of the Australian corporate sector.

For example, Tannen (1994b:108) draws on the linguistic concepts of ‘marked’ and ‘unmarked’ to remind us that men in the professional workplace represent the norm or standard. The male corporate uniform is unmarked, in this sense. While an individual man can choose a different dress style, he does not have to and, in fact, most do not. Unlike women, men can choose to be unmarked. As she surveys a meeting room, Tannen comments,

> Although no man wore makeup, you couldn’t say the men didn’t wear makeup in the sense that you could say a woman didn’t wear makeup.
>
> For men, no makeup is unmarked. I asked myself what style we women could have adopted that would have been unmarked, like the men’s. The answer was: none. There is no unmarked woman (Tannen, 1994b:110).

A question I put to each of the senior executives male and female, interviewed as part of this research was: did knowing that you were going to be filmed today influence what you chose to wear? Men were nonplussed by the question. On that morning, as all other mornings, they simply put on the uniform. But women understood the question. Given that the interview, they knew, centred on their experience as leaders, each had
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considered the issue of what ‘leaderly’ might look like for them. They had thought about what blend of generic and individual they would adopt and, most significantly, where they would like to position themselves along an imaginary continuum from, at one end, a version of the male professional uniform, and, at the other, an overtly feminine visual statement. They wanted to use clothes and makeup as a means of managing the impression they sought to communicate. This matter of ‘impression management’; and how it affects women and is interpreted by them will be examined further in Chapter 8.

However, those participating in the ‘women in business’ meeting cannot be seen as having consciously selected what to wear that particular morning based on the arrival of my film crew, since this was one of the meetings I was able to capture without any prior arrangements. We were in the building anyway and I saw all the women go into a large meeting room. We were able to secure consent on the spot and began filming immediately. Therefore, we must assume they self-presented in ways typical for each woman.

Given this significantly different profile from the one seen earlier in the chapter, in Robyn’s meeting, will these women also demonstrate a different linguistic repertoire? Will the chair enact her authority more directly, for instance? Perhaps the Sacks model for regulating speaking turns, explored in Chapter 5, will dominate the proceedings, together with evidence of more assertive strategies as agenda items are discussed. Since these women are used to working in a predominantly male organisation and have been successful in achieving results in a competitive culture, we could perhaps predict that their meeting style might be closer to the one seen in the all male meetings discussed in the previous chapter. To answer these questions, data from their meeting are examined in the following sections.

Example 6

1. Alison: We can talk about how the sponsorship of
2. the Telstra Awards has helped them. But
3. perhaps it would be worth getting something
4. more tangible =
5. Cheryl = Like how some of our business solutions have
6. actually helped them in {uh
In this extract, the women are working out how they will focus the marketing campaign they are planning. At line 1, Alison introduces the idea of linking with the Telstra Awards since their company is already a sponsor. But she acknowledges they need “something more tangible” to promote. Over the next thirty minutes the women work together to flesh out exactly what approach they should take. The discussion shows evidence of linguistic features which support this overall problem-solving aim.

For example, from lines 4 to 5; 7 to 8; 11 to 12; 18 to 19 and 20 to 21 the women exchange speaking turns so rapidly that no pause can be identified. This is called ‘latching’. It is often seen as a mark of cooperation (Cameron, 1997:56) since speakers must concentrate closely on what others are saying, if they are to latch their turn on to the precise finishing point of the previous person. Latching, therefore, involves attending both to meaning and timing. While it certainly demonstrates rapport, in workplace meetings it has a more powerful task-related function of sustaining a group’s focus on a single topic and so developing their shared thinking.
Other features contribute to the same effect. For instance, small overlaps and minimal responses, such as ‘yeah’ and ‘mm’ serve to encourage speakers to develop the topic. There is the sense of everyone progressing the discussion and moving towards consensus. Significantly, no vote was taken about using Katie in the promotion and the question was never formally put. In the context, since everyone had contributed to the final design and all potential difficulties or disadvantages had been flushed out, a vote would have been superfluous.

There are also examples of ‘shadowing’ in this extract, where speakers anticipate each others’ words. For instance, at lines 6 to 8, Karen fills out the rest of Cheryl’s sentence when Cheryl pauses momentarily. At line 8, Cheryl confirms the point. Karen and Adrienne have a similar type of exchange at lines 18-19, with Karen stating that the bank helped Katie to start out and Adrienne chiming in with “Helped her to get the whole thing going.”

Overall, the women employ linguistic strategies which support them in exploring exactly how they should approach the marketing campaign. This style is evident in women-only talk throughout my data and proves an effective way of jointly developing an idea, from its beginning as no more than a possibility through to an actionable plan. This is a point the chair, Amanda, comments on when I asked her later what differences she finds between women-only and mixed-gender teams, the latter being more the norm in her working week.

“I think perhaps a major difference is the fact that we tend to put an idea out on the table without knowing what the conclusion’s going to be and then everybody builds on that idea. It’s a consensus sort of process. We want to make sure that the whole group is comfortable. So everybody chips in as we talk, rather than having a position and then using that as a negotiating stance, which I think tends to happen more with the meetings with men.”

Successful problem-solving on the part of a team is predicated on the extent to which they can collaborate. The use of facilitative devices, as in this meeting, promotes collaboration.
Example 7

1. Caroline: We used to do quite a bit of advertising in
2. Marie Claire when it first came out – a
3. very focussed campaign and that worked
4. well for us. There is a lot of really good
5. stuff these magazines can do for
6. us. It’s just a case of being clear
7. about our objectives.
8. Cheryl: How did you measure those campaigns?
9. Caroline: I don’t really know! [Self-deprecating smile, shrugs. Everyone laughs]

This extract provides an example of a behaviour a number of researchers have noticed in women's social conversation: self-deprecating remarks. Cheryl has joined the team, bringing her marketing expertise to their work. Therefore, her question at line 8, “How did you measure those campaigns?” is a thoughtful one, underlining the importance of evaluating return on investment. In many workplace settings, Caroline’s response, “I don’t really know” would be risky, exposing her to criticism and loss of face. In this meeting, it would not have been difficult for her to couch what she did in fairly positive terms that justified the previous more casual approach. In fact, it is worth noting that the women later explain to Cheryl some strategies they had employed within very limited budget and time constraints.

Why does Caroline take this self-exposing risk? One explanation is that it constitutes a solidarity move. By making herself vulnerable, Caroline allows her colleagues to rally round, which they do at line 9 when all the women laugh in a warm, almost conspiratorial fashion. This strategy functions as a ritual, where one person exposes a weakness or an error and the others present affirm her. However, like any ritual it is dependent on a shared set of assumptions. If another party does not understand the steps in the ritual, they may not play the role the first speaker expects. They may take things literally, so that what was a solidarity move turns into a point-scoring exercise. In the case of the bank team, however, Caroline’s move provokes shared laughter and the women draw closer together. Interestingly, Cheryl herself adopts a similar strategy when Amanda introduces her to everyone in terms of her marketing expertise. She asserts “Oh, no, that’s not really true!” Again the women smile, laugh and make sympathetic noises.
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Cheryl’s expertise is accepted without her also coming across as superior and, therefore, separating herself from the collective of the team.

The following two examples provide evidence of what emerged as one of the most common characteristics of all the women-only conversations I recorded: extended sequences of simultaneous speech, with some sections impossible to transcribe.

Example 8

1. Cheryl: Do we know if the magazine has done any
2. previous research that we could simply
3. re-use, as far as what do their readers
4. want because that would give us
5. Sarah: yeah there is, it’s all about xxx
6. Karen: it’s a bit limited
   [multiple voices, unintelligible, overlapping talk]
7. Chris: Yeah, it’s very limited in terms of its scope
8. of information, what they want about
9. business and finance.
10. Amanda: And when you look at it, you’ve only got
11. about four paragraphs per advertorial
12. in the style that they’re using. So we’re
13. not going to be able to get as sophisticated
14. a message across.

The sequences of simultaneous speech occur when there is a rush of information or ideas. However, it is not the case that women engage in this strategy in a haphazard way, or at moments when it would run counter to the task or purpose of the meeting. For example, a single speaker, one-at-a-time floor is employed in women only meetings for activities such as introducing an agenda item; summarising progress on a point; clarifying agreement on an action or decision; offering expert ‘testimony’, reporting or updating and giving instructions.

Example 9

1. Janine: But it’s a case of the readership profile
2. of the magazine. It’s an average income
3. of $30,000 and that may not be the
4. appropriate target market for the product.

[Extended period of simultaneous talk with laughter. On video, everyone shows a high degree of animation and everyone’s involvement is apparent, although individual contributions are too hard to transcribe]

5. Amanda: Well, perhaps we can have a chat to you
6. about that. And Sam’s seeing the Media
7. Palace tomorrow.

Again there is the sense of a wave-like motion as a single speaker articulates the issue, everyone takes it up simultaneously and, finally, we return to a single speaker (in this instance, the chair), who draws forward an outcome. One point is worth stressing in relation to these sequences. At the time of observation, what was being said was clear to me. In fact, in my field notes I have outlines of the context during these sections. However, away from the actual event, only phrases here and there can be transcribed from the footage with any safety. Showing such extracts to mixed groups is also interesting. Typically, men find women’s simultaneous speech perplexing, even overwhelming, whereas women simply smile in recognition.

The men-only meeting style analysed in the previous chapter was described by participants themselves in athletic terms (jumping in or diving into the conversation) or with images of heroic endeavour (cutting in when no space seemed to be available). Researchers support this picture with the words they select to capture the quality of such talk. Pilkington (1992:59), for instance, calls men-only talk ‘competitive’ with frequent verbal ‘sparring’ and a ‘disjointed’ or ‘jerky’ rhythm caused by abrupt topic switches. Kiesling (1997:82) describes men’s language as constructing a ‘powerful individualistic identity’. Sacks (1974:678) himself sees the single-speaker floor as an ‘economy’, with competition to claim the scarce resource of a sole speaking turn.

In contrast, it is allusions to music which prevail in researchers’ descriptions of all female talk. Edelsky employs the term ‘fugue’, while Tannen (1989:17) calls it an ‘ensemble’ and Coates (1997:112) a kind of ‘jam session’. These different sets of images point to different underlying assumptions about how to develop conversational topics. This, in
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turn, is reflected in different attitudes towards how turns to speak should be taken in meetings.

A significant finding of the present study is that some of the distinguishing features that research has already established in women's social talk, such as simultaneous speech, are also found in women-only meetings in the Australian workplace. However, these features work to support the problem-solving task. They do not simply promote good relations. Amanda and her team developed a successful marketing campaign in this meeting and follow-up contact revealed that this was implemented to good effect over the next year.

Conclusion
The Sacks model has become the benchmark against which variations are measured and evaluated, as violations. However, the data from women-only meetings presented in this chapter suggest that the model is of questionable use when applied to women-only meetings. These are characterised by bursts of simultaneous speech as team members build on each others’ points to construct a shared solution.

Along with the overlapping talk, the frequent occurrence of laughter in the women-only data echoes existing research on social conversation among women friends. The laughter and the minimal responses allow those present to contribute to the shared floor, even if they do not have a substantive point to make at a particular moment. There is full participation in the activity of the meeting.

In addition, a range of affiliative strategies are drawn on to support collaborations as ideas are explored. These include small overlaps, latching, shadowing, repetition and statements couched in uncertain terms which cue colleagues to respond. Significantly, no-one in such meeting spoke as Lawrie did in Chapter 5, complaining of not being able to contribute.

The data presented here provide useful information about the norms of women-only groups in the Australian workplace, where (unlike social talk) there are the pressures of task and deadlines, together with the need to manage status appropriately. Women,
even younger, assertive women, seem to adapt certain features of female social conversation to the very different activity of workplace meetings.

Examining these data, it becomes important to distinguish between what constitutes an interruption and what can be seen as an overlap. Women in meetings do not often attempt to seize the floor for themselves by violating another woman’s completion rights. In fact, they tend rather to support each other with well-timed minimal responses and offers of phrases which work to complete or elaborate a speaker’s point. Instead of relinquishing their turn when one or two people chime in, speakers demonstrate that they understand others’ intentions are cooperative, by continuing to speak. The flow of talk, far from being disturbed by these overlaps, seems enriched by them.

Team members appear to be able to speak and listen at the same time, as they work together to develop an idea. When a significant new point is brought in, a single speaker holds the floor alone, but, once the point is established, other speakers feel they can join in with questions, supportive comments or expansions of the idea being explored.

However, the data also demonstrate that Australian women draw on a much wider range of linguistic strategies than those evident in the social conversation of friends. Their meetings overall follow a linear structure, with agenda items dealt with in turn, and an orderly progression from the chair’s introductory remarks through to the closing summary. The woman chairing the meeting (generally the most senior person present) keeps things on track and enacts her authority clearly, albeit in a consensus-seeking style. This was noticeable even where the team of young, ‘high potential’ women was concerned.

In other words, Australian women appear to combine elements of what can be termed ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ styles. Taken together, these data challenge current myths and stereotypes of women generally, and women managers in particular, as focussed on relationship rather than task, or rapport rather than report talk. It would seem that the truth, in Australia at least, is more varied and more complex.

Having established a sense of how men and women manage meetings with their same sex colleagues, the next chapter explores how men and women interact when they
come together in today's typical mixed-gender meetings. What happens when women and men work side by side in the same team? Which style dominates in their meetings? Do things change if there are more men than women, or more women than men? Does the gender of the chair influence the running of a meeting and the outcomes it achieves?
Chapter 7
Data analysis: men and women side by side in meetings

Overview of chapter
As mentioned in Chapter 1, many professional people today can spend more than 70 per cent of their working week in meetings of one kind and another. For chief executives, the figure tends to be even higher. Although many of those filmed in the course of this research felt that at least some of their time in many meetings was wasted, they readily conceded that other meetings were vital. A meeting is often the setting where problems are solved and decisions taken which have an impact on both short and longer term strategic direction. They also function as a critical site where leadership potential is enacted and identified. In an important sense, organisations are talked into being through meetings. Those interviewed, therefore, were in agreement: meetings do matter. Yet there was also a prevailing sense of frustration with meetings, their quality and the results they achieve. The purpose of this chapter is to explore some of the reasons behind this frustration, especially as it was described by women.

In previous chapters, what appear to be the preferred styles of Australian men and of Australian women were explored, through an analysis of data showing men-only and women-only meetings. These data provide a reference point against which this chapter’s analysis of mixed-gender meetings can be contrasted. An important goal of the present study is to understand more accurately what happens in Australian organisations when men and women work side by side. To this end, three interrelated issues will be examined: what linguistic strategies do men and women employ in their shared interactions; how do they enact their professional authority when chairing a meeting; and what is the effect of the methods they select to accomplish their task-related goals.

The chapter will explore these themes as they are played out in two categories of meeting: where the senior person is female and where the senior person is male. This will provide an insight into the way Australian professional women manage the particular challenge they face in operating at senior levels in a society where traditional images of authority and leadership have generally been portrayed in masculine terms: the tough, competitive, heroic individual fighting a relatively solitary battle, beating his opponents and winning the prize. There is, in effect, a conflation of images of authority and images
of a certain type of masculinity. As Tannen (1994b:166) comments, “Images of authority come drenched in gender.” Where does this leave women?

Employees’ expectations of authority figures may contradict society’s expectations of women, leaving women with an unenviable dilemma: should they minimise their femininity (and be more assertive) or minimise their competence (and be more feminine). When men and women behave in ways associated with widely held constructs of leadership, they are generally seen as more assertive and more traditionally masculine (Robinson and Reis, 1989). Clearly, such judgements would function to reinforce and reward masculine identity in a man but may prove problematic for a woman. Women who are evaluated as somewhat masculine in their behaviour risk being seen as violating the norms for femininity, and so tend to be disliked by both men and other women (Aries, 1996). This can be a high price to pay for visibility and career success.

Meetings chaired by women: Human Resources team

This first example of a mixed-gender meeting, chaired by a woman, involves a six person team, filmed in suburban Sydney. The team members are Jane, Paul, Judy, Carole, Sandra and Evette. Together the team manages the human resource and training functions of a large shared service centre for a national financial institution. Jane is Human Resource Manager of the centre. The organisation draws its employees from the surrounding western suburbs and so, reflecting the demographic profile of the community, many are first and second generation immigrants to Australia. For this reason, managing diversity and promoting good working relations among staff members are key activities of the team. The purpose of the meeting I filmed was for the team to review the diversity-related issues that had been escalated to them during the previous year and evaluate how they had handled these matters.

In interviewing the team after filming their meeting, Jane said that one of her objectives in this meeting was to promote the team’s learning, including learning from mistakes and failures. Her intention was that her team members would be able to examine their work without becoming defensive or judgemental. Jane herself has a definite presence. She is articulate and has a low-pitched, strong voice. Her personality is such that some people, both male and female, could find her a little intimidating and she stated later that over
the last five years she has consciously adjusted her style to avoid this. She sets a particular tone from the outset, as can be seen from her opening remarks.

Example 1

1. Jane: OK. Well, I just thought we’d get together
2. this morning so we could talk about,
3. em, I guess, some of the diversity issues
4. we’ve had over the past year and also
5. some of the pro-active things we’ve done.
6. em, to try to promote diversity within the
7. workplace. And part of, I guess, the
8. work that, em, we come up with today
9. will form perhaps the basis of our objective
10. around diversity for the next year. So, rather
11. than focus on something sort of very
12. specifically, I guess I thought we could
13. actually have a broader one that covers
14. a lot of issues, em, within the workplace.
15. So, perhaps just to start off, could we
16. look at the last year in review and
17. talk about specifically some of the issues
18. that were escalated to our team? So, if
19. we can just sort of highlight those issues
20. and then we might choose a couple
21. of those to actually just work through,
22. around what sort of advice we gave and
23. how we handled that.

Jane’s opening comments, which introduce what she would like to cover in the meeting, are heavily laden with what are often called ‘pragmatic particles.’ These include words and phrases such as the following: ‘I thought’, ‘I guess’, ‘sort of’, ‘perhaps’ and ‘actually’. In addition, Jane employs a number a modal forms which contribute towards a similar effect, for instance, ‘would’, ‘could’, and ‘might’. A good example of Jane’s linguistic style is what she says at lines 10 to 14. Her meaning is along the following lines: Rather than
focus on a specific objective, we should have a broader goal that encompasses many diversity issues within the workplace. Her actual words are:

10. “So, rather than focus on something
11. *sort of very specifically*, I *guess I thought*
12. *we could actually* have a broader one
13. that covers a lot of issues within the
14. workplace.” [features under discussion are italicised].

Linguistic features such as these carry a complex set of meanings. In a literal sense, they communicate imprecision. However, their frequent use by professionally competent women in my data, including those such as Jane with status in their organisational hierarchies, communicates an affective not a referential meaning. They are markers of solidarity and signal that this event is intended to be informal and relaxed. Social distance between manager and team members is reduced and Jane implies a desire on her part for a close relationship with those present. She effectively sets the scene for the type of discussion which, indeed, follows where team members can honestly assess what has worked and what has not, without blaming each other or becoming defensive.

This use of pragmatic particles by the women in my data and its positive influence on building openness and trust was so marked that it caused me to test it by experimenting in a conscious way myself. Alongside filming the meetings which are the main focus of this thesis, I also interviewed thirteen senior executive men and women about their experience of leadership in Australian organisations. I had designed the interview questions carefully to explore the particular issues of interest in my research. Some of these questions were quite challenging for people to answer, for example, reviewing times when they had failed; what was ‘failure’ to them, how had they handled this; what did they learn. As well, I wanted to ask each person basically the same questions to make later comparison easier. This meant that, by the time I interviewed the second or third person, I felt confident with the structure and could lead the person through the interview without even needing to refer to any notes. However, when I deliberately introduced more pragmatic particles, of the kind seen in Jane’s remarks, I found the atmosphere noticeably shifted. The interviewee relaxed more, rapport developed more quickly and people became more open and more revealing in their responses. The inclusion of ‘just’, ‘sort of’ and ‘I guess’ function as solidarity markers and signals of a
more intimate connection. Such effects, operating at the level of linguistic devices tend to go unnoticed but exert a significant affective influence below people’s conscious awareness.

Another linguistic form, which is characterised by early researchers as displaying uncertainty or hesitation (for example, Lakoff, 1975:17) is the high rising terminal (HRT). This is a prosodic pattern where the voice rises at the end of a sentence, or even at the end of a particular phrase within a sentence. Jane’s introductory remarks contain four examples of HRTs, excluding the rise in her intonation in line 18 where she forms a grammatical question. For example, her voice rises twice in the following sentence (as marked by /) at lines 7 to 10.

7. “And part of, I guess, the work that, em,
8. we come up with today will form perhaps
9. the basis of our objective/ around diversity
10. for the next year/.”

The effect of Australian women’s use of HRTs in professional meetings cannot be simplistically dismissed by applying Lakoff’s diagnosis. They are not attempting to form a straightforward question but failing. Their function is a socio-emotional one, rather than grammatical. Listeners are, in effect, cued or invited to react as the speaker checks that everyone shares their views. In this case, Jane’s team members variously nodded, smiled or gave minimal, backchannel responses such as ‘mm’ at each of her HRTs. Although Jane enacted her authority both by declaring the agenda and setting her preferred context for how they should handle it, she achieves these goals in ways that emphasise informality and cooperation. These points take on particular significance when it is remembered that Jane has a confident, assertive physical demeanour (for example, she makes constant, strong eye contact) and, for a woman, a strong, resonant voice. It is as if her linguistic style plays against others aspects of her manner to help her locate a ‘via media’, a ‘middle way’ between too much and too little self-assertion.

**Small Talk**
This team comprises five women and only one man, Paul. What was his experience of working in a predominately female team, as many HR teams tend to be? Paul commented on the amount of social talk at the beginning and end of the day, over lunch,
and at the openings and closings of meetings. As well as teasing his female colleagues about what he calls “gossip” and “a waste of time”, Paul also wanted to make some serious points. He said he enjoyed the warm relations among team members and the fact that people took an interest in each others’ lives outside work. “I think this type of talk builds trust and it actually helps us to get the job done in a pressured environment where you don’t know what’s coming up. You need to know you can count on your colleagues.” In fact, as the team came into the meeting room and settled down to work through their agenda, there was lively small talk with a lot of laughter. This included a discussion of Evette’s hair, Carole’s diet, the annoying habits husbands can have, and the forthcoming terrors of holding a birthday party for an eight year old and his twelve friends. None of this prevented the task being the dominant focus but all of it certainly added to camaraderie and trust. Small talk oils the wheels.

Tannen (1994b:64) has found that the small talk men and women engage in is different, with male small talk being less personal. In her recent study of the New Zealand workplace, Holmes (2003:579) concludes that women contribute most and sometimes all the small talk occurring at the boundaries of interactions. The Australian data collected for the present study confirm the New Zealand finding. Where men dominated, there was less small talk and what there was could not be seen as personal in the same way: there were no confidences shared and no vulnerabilities exposed.

One example provided a particularly striking contrast to the prevalence of small talk engaged in by women in both women-only meetings and those where there were significant numbers of women, compared to men. In a Melbourne organisation, when the men were arriving for an all male meeting I was scheduled to film, they engaged in what I had by then come to recognise as fairly typical male small talk: good humoured banter and jocular teasing, usually of one individual. In this case, the men were teasing Greg because he was notoriously choosy about his coffee mug. If he could not have his special mug, he would, as on that occasion, go off to search for it, even if this required an extended hunt and then washing the mug. Greg took it in good part. There was laughter and then the men settled down to their meeting.

Some two hours later, when we had completed filming both their meeting and an interview with the team about their meeting, one man, David, offered to stay behind and
help us pack up our equipment. David seemed particularly friendly and high spirited. This impression was so marked that I mentioned it to him. David agreed that he was feeling happy and explained that he’d been up all night at the local hospital. His wife had gone into labour the previous afternoon and David had left work at around 3pm. Their first child, a girl, had eventually been born in the early hours of the morning. David had showered and come straight to work, where the meeting we had just filmed was the first of his activities for the day. As he described the birth, David was emotional and elated. The film crew and I now understood the reason for his infectious good mood. But it intrigued me that the small talk at the start of the meeting had revolved around Greg and his penchant for his own special mug. No-one asked David about the birth. I wondered if perhaps the other men had not been aware that David had gone home early the previous day and that he was now a father, a totally besotted father at that. Later I telephoned one of the other men at the meeting and asked if he and his colleagues had known of David’s situation that morning. He said they all knew and explained that the men would mention something personal like that one-to-one and tended not to speak about what he called “personal stuff” in the larger forum of a meeting.

Perhaps that particular organisation had a more extreme version of the kind of ‘blokey’ culture where individuals sense the existence of an unwritten rule that one’s personal life, with all its joys and sorrows, has no place at work: that you hang up that aspect of your identify on a peg at the door and pick it up again when you go home.

However, I feel that is only one aspect of a complex situation. While there was certainly more personal talk and laughter in settings with more women, in male-dominated workplaces it was often the men, not the women, who engaged in the limited amount of small talk which I witnessed. For example, at the end of a meeting involving six men and one women all at a senior executive level, one of the men described how exhausted he was after a weekend which had included cheering his son at a soccer match and supervising his daughter’s first sleepover for four friends on Saturday night. His colleagues listened to the brief humorous story and there was some light-hearted discussion about coming to work to recover.

In the corridor outside the conference room, I caught up with Jill, the only woman at the meeting. I asked her why she had said nothing. She explained that, at her level of
seniority and in this organisation, she had learned that engaging in personal small talk was different for women. When a male colleague described his family commitments at the weekend, it made a positive impression of a well-rounded person with a stable family life: clearly, the kind of person the organisation could rely on. However, she insisted, when women talked about their children it had a different effect. It triggered doubts about their ability to be focussed and fully committed to the demands of their professional role. The implication might be that such women could not be relied on. As a mother of three children and having suffered in the past from being seen as balancing divided loyalties, Jill had learned to expose nothing. She disciplined herself never to engage in small talk, even when her male colleagues did. This distinction is similar to that found by Trompenaars (1998:228) and discussed in Chapter 1, where female managers felt showing emotion risked triggering stereotypes about women, while male managers felt it would create a positive impression.

**Meetings chaired by women: Strategy and Research Team**

There are seven people in this team: Amanda, Dennis, Rodger, Natasha, Douglas, Peter and Victoria. Amanda is the team leader. I should point out that this is not the same Amanda whose team was discussed in Chapter 6. In fact, this team design new software and multi-media products for a telecommunications company in Melbourne. As is often the case today for a research team, the company had made a deliberate decision to bring together a number of people with quite different professional backgrounds. One of the advantages offered by a cross-functional team is that the ‘speed to market’ of new products can be enhanced because different interests are represented from the outset. Gone are the days when researchers were allowed to create something they thought customers might like and, much later, marketing people were landed with the challenge of working out how to sell the new product. The members of this team fall into two categories which, in this industry, are termed ‘usability’ and ‘feasibility’. The first group looks at content, the market and what customers are or will be demanding. The role of the second group is to work out how to develop the concept and make it work.

In the context of the discussion in Chapter 1 of this thesis where Australia’s sexually-demarcated economy was described, it should not be surprising to learn that the professional backgrounds of these team members divide along gender lines. Douglas, Peter, Dennis and Rodger are computer scientists who have worked in research and
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development for a number of years, and they comprise the ‘feasibility’ group. As mentioned, their organisation has recently decided to experiment with cross-functional product development teams. The men have now been working for the last year in this new configuration. Natasha and Victoria are both psychologists with specialised interests in consumer behaviour. Amanda, the project manager and most senior person, is a sociologist by training and has also worked in marketing roles. The three women provide the ‘usability’ input. The aim of this particular meeting is to progress the experimental work they have been engaged in, using web-site portals for various purposes. It is intended that this meeting solve some of the problems they have encountered and brainstorm possible user requirements. Amanda, as chair, opens the meeting.

Example 2

1. Amanda: Well, as we flagged last week in a previous
2. meeting, we want to talk today – to focus
3. on our gallery kind of concept, web-site
4. portal. And, essentially, it’s actually something
5. that was sort of commented on at the
6. design workshop we ran a while ago now,
7. whereby people wanted to actually have
8. a space to sort of display their artwork
9. or their hobbies, in terms of photography
10. and stuff. So, em, Rodger [she smiles at
11. him, he looks away] has sort of picked up
12. the role of having a look at his. So, we
13. really wanted this session, to really be a bit
14. of a brainstorm about issues and also, em,
15. I guess, what we think might be the
16. user requirements for such a thing. And
17. then, em, Rodger’s going to do some
18. further work on it and we can sort of
19. determine if it’s actually feasible for us,
20. for our portal site. So, with that I might
21. hand over to you, Rodger, because I
22. guess you – we actually talked about this
23. almost a week ago, so you’ve had a
tiny bit of a think.

During Amanda’s introductory remarks, Victoria and Natasha both nod and smile at
intervals, maintaining eye contact with her in an encouraging way. Amanda herself has a
very expressive face and uses her hands frequently in gestures that emphasise her key
points. She turns to both sides of the table, ensuring she includes each person. Douglas
looks at Amanda, Dennis looks in the opposite direction and the other two men mostly
look down. In my field notes, I wrote that I had the sense Amanda would need to work
hard in this meeting to get any collaborative discussion going. The men all seemed
reserved and absorbed in their own thoughts. The sound engineer had difficulty
adjusting the men’s microphones so that their voices could be picked up and recorded.
Rodger, in particular, could scarcely be heard and we set his microphone on maximum.

In this context, Amanda’s expressive, relaxed conversational style helped to smooth the
way for profitable discussion. Many of the linguistic features she employs are ones
common to most of the women in my data and have already been discussed. These
include pragmatic particles, especially ‘sort of’, colloquial words such as ‘really’, ‘actually’
and ‘stuff’ and phrases like ‘I guess’. Amanda signals an informal meeting where people
can throw ideas around without being judged. In fact, in the space of a minute, she
employs ‘sort of’ four times; ‘a bit of’ twice; ‘kind of’ once; ‘actually’ four times; ‘really’
three times and ‘I guess’ twice. Her last sentence also has two high rising terminals, as
she moves towards handing over to Rodger and works hard to elicit his involvement. “So
with that I might hand over to you, Rodger, because I guess you – we actually talked
about this almost a week ago/, so you’ve had a little bit of a think/.”

Rodger, as indicated above, has been fairly impassive as Amanda speaks. Perhaps, I
wondered, he did not know to what she was referring. The fact that she feels it
necessary to say “we actually talked about this almost a week ago” sounds rather like a
reminder, an attempt to jog his memory. “So you’ve had a little bit of a think” functions as
a way of protecting Rodger from possible embarrassment if in fact, he has not managed
to prepare any worthwhile ideas. Throughout the meeting Amanda works hard to create
a safe space where her team can speak in the experimental way necessary if they are to
be creative.
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This was useful, not only in encouraging the computer scientists to be more forthcoming but also in saving face for Natasha and Victoria, enabling them to ask the kind of probing questions which, while part of their role, risk provoking impatience from their technical colleagues. As Victoria said later, “Everyone sees the world through different eyes. We are a team so you have to listen and ask ‘Why is that?’ Throughout you need to keep respect for the people you’re working with. Or else it would be too easy to say ‘I’ve had enough’ and just walk away.”

Peter made the interesting observation that he finds himself looking for ways around problems which, in the absence of the usability people pushing him, he believes he may never have considered. Not appreciating the technical difficulties, they raise an issue and, somehow, he finds a way to deliver what they want. “In a purely technical group you may not even consider the idea to begin with because you know that this was going to be something that would be very difficult, if not impossible, to do.” In effect, as they talked afterwards about how they help to make this quite challenging team productive and committed to finding common ground, they were also providing evidence of the usefulness of Amanda’s style in drawing them together.

Throughout the meeting, Amanda works to ensure her team members listen to and build on each others’ ideas. She does not want individuals to simply present their views without connecting to what their colleagues are thinking. At times this is hard work when the four male computer scientists exchange quick turns among themselves and risk taking the discussion off into technical arguments alone. From my vantage point in the far corner, these intervals are like watching a ball being tossed around a group, with three spectators ignored. Amanda acknowledges her role in managing the different meeting styles among her team members:

“I’ve noticed that the men in the group are perhaps a bit more assertive in the way they communicate a particular point of view. I’m conscious of the fact that myself and the other women in the group try to phrase things in a way – taking a step back from it and saying ‘Yes, I can see your point there. That’s a good point but what about this?’ I’m trying to give some validation.”
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There was considerable evidence of her ‘validating’ people’s ideas, facilitating connections and encouraging contributions. In the following three extracts (A, B and C), Amanda affirms her team member before pushing their concept a little further. In each extract, the relevant part of Amanda’s response is italicised.

Example 3
A
1. A Victoria: I think that’s one thing for us to consider –
2. what sort of images. It might not just be photos.
3. It might be other sorts of artwork that people
4. want to display.
5. Amanda: I guess you’re right. We could think about sound
6. as well.
7. Victoria: Yes we could.
8. Amanda: Even video clips?

B
9. Peter: Maybe this is something you want to put in
10. your home zone web page.
11. Amanda: Yeah, that’s true. It could be an attractive kind
12. of picture.

C
13. C Dennis: We should be able to get them to input their poetry
14. into our text box, like a form, and then the
15. contents of that form just get displayed.
16. Amanda: That’d be good, I reckon. I was thinking with
17. the form kind of approach, we could get them
18. to put in some mandatory information, like
19. their name.
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As the person ultimately responsible for ensuring the project is completed on time and within its allocated budget, Amanda sees it as part of her role to help a disparate team to collaborate. This goal does not remain at an abstract level but is translated into linguistic strategies which accomplish a particular practical purpose.

There is evidence, throughout all the meetings chaired by women, of the deliberate use of communicative features which elicit contributions from their team members. In Amanda’s case, her challenge involves a team where any style differences arising from people’s gender are intensified by significant differences in professional background. In early childhood, we are socialised into broad patterns of behaviour associated with cultural and gender expectations, but when we enter our chosen professions there is a sense in which we are socialised again. In effect, we are taught to conform to that profession’s assumptions about how to think, and how to organise information and present an argument, both orally and in writing. Workplace meetings can become stuck as a result of style differences which reflect an individual’s professional training. Such differences then have the effect of exacerbating any tensions arising from other sources, for example different cultures, personalities or genders. In a particular situation, all these variables may co-vary, adding to people’s sense of frustration with their colleagues.

In a meeting I recorded in Hong Kong, for example, those present included men and women, together with people from different cultural backgrounds and the diversity of personalities typically found in any team. They represented various divisions within an Australian company with significant business interests in Asia.

The team had come together to develop a strategic plan for the company’s international operations over the next three years. It was, therefore, an important meeting with a clear objective. However, the discussion became bogged down, with the Australian-born General Manager finally declaring his frustration. The turning point came when they realised that everyone in the room had a broad commerce or marketing training, whereas the General Manager was a biochemist. He brought to their meeting a particular set of assumptions about how to approach problem-solving, based on his scientific training. It was this difference, not those more obvious ones related to culture, gender or personality, that proved to be the stumbling block for the team. Once their taken-for-granted assumptions about what was ‘logical’ had been exposed and a shared
problem-solving methodology negotiated, they were able to work collaboratively on their plan.

Typically, when a team is working through the sometimes delicate process of establishing this rapport, the ability to employ linguistic strategies that promote clarity and participation becomes important. In the data collected in the course of this research, such strategies were not demonstrated solely by women, but there were more women than men who took this facilitative role. When, as in Jane or Amanda’s case, the woman also has authority as the most senior person, it perhaps makes it easier to steer the team discussion along more supportive lines. However, there were also examples of women adopting this role without the mantle of authority. In smaller teams, such a style tended to be influential but in larger teams it was sometimes overtaken by a more competitive overall frame.

**Supporting collaboration without the authority of being the chair**

This small team comprises five people: Mark, Cathy, Bob, Ed and Van. Mark is the team leader and the purpose of their meeting is to review progress on a community development project their non-government organisation is funding in the Northern Territory, in conjunction with an indigenous body based in Darwin. Van is an immigrant to Australia from Vietnam. She has been here for more than ten years but still finds many of the unwritten rules about Australian meeting behaviour difficult. This is a common problem faced by newcomers to Australia. It was one they discussed with me in passionate terms at the end of meetings I filmed where, typically, people from an East Asian background found it hard to get and keep a turn, as described in Chapter 5.

As well as uncertainty about expectations, migrant women face an additional obstacle in attempting to establish a positive impression of themselves in meetings. Many women from East Asian cultures, in particular, may have been socialised into gender-appropriate behaviours which run counter to the assertive norms underpinning success in workplaces here. A study of skilled migrant women in Australia (Hawthorne, 1996:50) concludes:

- Speaking at meetings in Australia means you contribute and understand;
- it is also a way of showcasing for promotion. For some NESB women however, public speech may be embarrassing on account of errors in
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English, or seem culturally inappropriate. All her life, for instance, a Chinese professional woman may have expressed interest and respect through quiet concentration. It may have been unseemly to criticise or make suggestions – particularly when she was new to an organisation, or younger than others attending. She may take time to realise her ongoing silence in Australia leaves her at risk of being regarded as a foreign mute with nothing to contribute.

Hawthorne found that for many of the migrant women she interviewed, workplace meetings constituted “ordeals embedded in each week.” Even if someone creates an opportunity to bring you in, it may still prove frustratingly difficult to convey your point in such a way that your colleagues understand it and so can make full use of it. In the following extract, Cathy employs a range of facilitation strategies to help the team access Van’s contribution.

Example 4

1. Cathy: Van, what do you think?
2. Van: But the point is I am very impressed with Jim
3. {and he’s doing a good job
4. Cathy: { mm yeah
5. Van: Elders they say a different story and they say
6. nothing happening. Maybe we do not have
7. good communication. Maybe, you know, the message
8. that I got was that, yes, they are trying to do =
9. Cathy: = the company?
10. Van: Yes, company. But they are not listening to us,
11. {try to find out what we want
12. Cathy: { The Aboriginal people?
13. Van: What they want, yes. The liaison with the
14. {community
15. Cathy: { mm with the community
16. Van: in terms of rehabilitating the environment. We
17. now have 14 people in the community
18. involved.
19. Cathy: Great! So, what’s our next step?
20. Van: I think our main issue here is about communication. They don't have good liaise strategy.
21. Mark: Exactly right, Van. We'll need to address this as a priority.

At line 1, Cathy creates a turn for Van, bringing her in, so that she does not have to compete for the floor. However, Van is not then abandoned to make what she can of the opportunity. Cathy works actively with Van to ensure her contribution receives a hearing. At line 4, she provides an encouraging ‘Mm yeah’ and it is clear that Van understands that this minimal response or back channel is not intended as an interruption, since she continues speaking. However, between lines 8 and 13, Van’s problems in making clear to whom her pronouns ‘they’ and, later, ‘we’ refer puts her contribution at risk of being sidelined because it is too hard for her colleagues to follow. Cathy comes in quickly at line 9 to clarify that ‘they’ means the mining company operating near the community and, at line 12, she helps Van repair her error in using ‘we’ at line 11, instead of ‘they’. At line 15, her repetition of Van’s “with the community” has an affirming effect. Van feels Cathy understands what she is trying to say. Her question at line 19, “So what’s our next step?” helps Van to state in clear terms the main issue as she sees it, such that Mark, the team leader, acknowledges Van’s assessment of the situation and positions her idea as the team’s priority.

Each of the techniques Cathy uses contributes to the elucidation of Van’s idea but perhaps her most significant intervention is at line 19. In the meeting data involving colleagues from different cultures which I have collected over an eight year period, there are frequent examples of mismatches in rhetorical organisation causing a loss of information. These reflect culture-bound preferences for where the main point in an utterance should be located, with Australians preferring it up front and many other cultures locating it after a suitable introduction or lead in. This can cause colleagues or counterparts to feel uncertain about what the person is trying to say: they may understand each word and even each sentence but feel confused about the overall point of the utterance. Cathy brings Van in, supports her in speaking, clarifies misunderstandings and helps to draw out her key idea. The team went on to develop Van’s point about the need for better liaison.

After the meeting, Cathy had this to say:
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“What’s essential is that you’re prepared to take time to actually really listen, be patient, not interrupt and be genuinely interested – like searching for what the person’s saying. Sometimes I don’t understand people 100 per cent and Van at times. As my feelings of trust and our relationship have grown, I might say to her, “I can’t understand’, from a need to really understand what she’s saying. Van’s got a lot to offer. She makes a lot of useful points. I don’t want us to miss them.”

The facilitative approach contrasts with the different one taken by Duc Dung’s colleagues described in Chapter 5. Duc Dung also finds it hard to get a turn to speak in the free-for-all meeting style favoured in Australian workplaces. However, his colleagues did not actively draw him in, feeling that this might put Duc Dung on the spot. Their intention, like Cathy’s, is to show a positive and cooperative team spirit. But the way this intention is realised differs. In a singly-developed, one-at-a-time speaking floor perhaps co-operation simply means not preventing someone from talking.

Facilitative style used by men

As mentioned earlier, there were a small number of instances in the corpus of data showing men employing these supportive and inclusive skills, despite the fact that such features are stereotypically associated with women’s style. For instance, in workshops I regularly distribute transcripts of around a dozen meeting openings from my data. Course participants generally have no difficulty in sorting these into two groups: male chairs and female chairs. And they are generally correct. Examples 1 & 2 in this chapter - Jane and Amanda’s opening remarks at their team meetings - are quickly identified as likely to have been said by women (what tends to prove more challenging for course participants is imagining that such a style may have positive not negative effects, in a particular context). However, in the same workshop exercise people usually categorise the following example wrongly.

Example 5

1. Before the, before the starting item, I’d
2. just like to say a bit about how I think
3. the company might be going [stands with weight on one leg,
4. other foot crossed in front, wrings hands and
This opening demonstrates many of the features, noticed already in Jane and Amanda’s conversational style, and associated with women. The use of modals, such as ‘would’ and ‘might’, of the pragmatic particles ‘just’, ‘a bit’, ‘sort of’ and ‘I guess’ all contribute towards the impression that this is likely to be a woman. Finally, the somewhat hesitant or self-deprecating stance and self conscious hand movements may, for some people, add to that view. But the speaker here was, Steve, a middle-aged male engineer, newly appointed as MD of a heavy manufacturing company and opening a two day strategy and budget conference with his twelve direct reports, all male.

Throughout the two days Steve employed this style and it became clear it was his typical manner, not simply a function of tentativeness at the start of the meeting. Here are several more glimpses of Steve’s way of putting his views across:

“I wrote this late in the evening. I think some of it could do with sort of refining. But I just wanted to sort of share my thinking on where we could go with this.”

“That's sort of what I just wanted to cover.”

“I guess what I'd like to add is sort of about the reasoning. We need to surface the strategy behind what we're kind of doing here.”

The important question is what was the effect of this style? Given that, in this instance, it was employed by a man to an audience of men within a male-dominated industry, it might be possible to look at the style’s impact without any other variables (such as our stereotypical images of women as nurturing facilitators) clouding the issues. We can evaluate the style on its own terms.

It emerged that Steve was enthusiastically commended for what his colleagues saw as his capacity to create an open, relaxed atmosphere where people could say what was on their minds, without fear of blame or retribution. What else might have helped Steve to be experienced in this way, rather than negatively evaluated as weak, tentative or, most damaging of all for an Australian male, ‘feminine’? I learned that, for the previous
eight years, the company had been run by a powerful leader in the traditional mould. In that culture, senior executives had to be careful what they said and mostly it was wise to keep a low profile. If the senior team met at all, it was to provide an audience for the MD’s monologue. Generally, he met his direct reports individually or in smaller groups: a divide and rule policy. However, a series of financial crises had exposed the organisation as mismanaged and poorly led. The old MD had been offered an early retirement and Steve had been appointed from outside the company several months before the meeting under discussion.

Arguably, in these circumstances, the senior team was open to change. They knew first hand the disadvantages of a non-collaborative style, including its devastating impact on managing the complex business problems currently facing all organisations in their manufacturing sector. They had learned that no single individual, no matter how tough or how talented, could achieve results in a market which seemed to shift under their feet. For these reasons, it might be the case that the men were willing to try something quite new. However, it could also be argued that, with no precedent for seeing someone with a low-key facilitative style, also as an authoritative leader, they might simply have rejected Steve.

Initially, there was some mistrust. Despite Steve’s encouragement, few people spoke for the first half day. Gradually, he won them over, as they saw that his commitment to creating a collaborative frame for their work together was genuine and could be trusted. What did the men make of the meeting at the end of day two? Here are a few of their comments.

“We had more output from this meeting than any we’ve ever had. The level of participation was fantastic. No-one just sat there. We’ve still got problems but now we’re working together to solve them.”

“I’ve been waiting 12 years for openness and trust to come through the group. We’re on the way to having a football team of managers that are all individuals but at least want to win as a team in business – a great outcome.”

“Steve was excellent. He doesn’t threaten or blame. He set the scene for an open, participative discussion. The old ways have gone. This is a real leader we’ve got and we can go places with him.”

Margaret Byrne
PhD Thesis
The intriguing aspect of the men’s reactions was that they saw Steve, and his encouraging, self-effacing style, as nevertheless ‘leaderly’ and effective within their traditionally, even stereotypically, male organisation, where women occupy only administrative or personnel roles, not line positions at a senior level. The example of Steve and the positive impact he had in his meeting suggest that the style itself may have benefits for Australian organisations and that its influence may not be limited to women. If a team’s raison d’être is to work together to solve complex problems, then a collaborative approach is likely to support the task. The linguistic strategies discussed in this chapter demonstrate ways people in Australian organisations are drawing on techniques that appear particular suited to modern management challenges.

Meetings chaired by men: where men outnumber women

In meetings where men outnumber women and where there is a man in the chair, it is the ‘no gap, no overlap’, one speaker at-a-time style of conducting the discussion which characterises the data. In other words, it seems that women accommodate to male norms, and turns to speak are taken in the ways outlined in Chapter 5. There are only slight gaps and slight overlaps, with any occasion where two voices come in simultaneously giving way quickly to one, dominant voice. Speakers’ points are generally not finished for them and ideas are presented in a relatively complete way, with no expectation that others will share in the construction of an argument. Team members must be sufficiently competent at ‘cutting in’ to be able to contribute their point unaided. Inevitably, this means that in each of these meetings, one or more team members say little or nothing.

In the interviews conducted with participants at the conclusion of filming their meeting, this fact was always investigated. On a few occasions, someone who had not spoken explained that this was because the meeting agenda that day had largely concerned matters outside their expertise. Interestingly, only women provided this rationale. It seemed that male team members were more willing to speak, even when they knew little about the topic. One man was open in acknowledging this point. He said he sometimes speaks in a meeting when he has nothing useful to contribute because he is “ambitious” and likes to “impress”. He knew the importance of visibility.
Sometimes women remarked that they were less at ease in mixed-gender meetings than in the rarer, all-female meetings they attended. One woman commented, “In mixed-gender meetings, particularly when there’s more of a hierarchy operating, you tend to feel a little more reticent about jumping in and sometimes you feel a little less listened to as well.” It appears that more women than men find the competitive, quick-fire meeting style a challenge, where speakers must self-select and seize the floor faster than a rival, rather than collaborate to construct a shared floor.

These features were demonstrated in a large meeting filmed in a Sydney financial institution. There were fifteen people at the meeting, four of them were women and the chair was male. These were senior executives from various business units who come together each month for a lunch-time meeting. It was noticeable that the four women sat together. They did not arrive at the same time and, during the fifteen minutes or so when people socialised around the table where sandwiches had been set out, the women mingled with the men. Nevertheless, when the chair called the meeting to order and everyone sat down, the women ended up in a cluster. At the end I asked Annette, one of the four, if this was typical and how she might explain it. She was surprised. She said she had not noticed they had done this but wanted to reflect on what it might mean. If it was an unconscious, mutual support move, then it worked, since the women did actively encourage each other when one of their number made a point.

They also encouraged their male colleagues, as in the extract below, where a man addressed a question to the chair about the figures he had just presented.

**Example 6**

1. Male: I’ve got a question about the samples in your survey. Are they customer-facing staff? And I’ve got a concern about the sample sizes being so small, um maybe…
2. Female: You’re not quite sure what we’d be justified in reading into this?
3. Male: Yeah, you’re not quite sure if…it’s just that I…
4. Female: So, what should we conclude from the survey?
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10. Chair: Well Alan you make a good point there but
11. I could probably pull something out for you.

It is unlikely that the chair would have had such a clear understanding of the question being put to him if the female colleague had not helped to draw the point out. Throughout the meeting, it was the four women who provided the small supportive signals (such as smiles, nods, ‘mm’ and ‘yeah’) that help a current speaker to know they are successful in conveying their point. It may be that this type of encouragement is not as important to men as it appears to be to women, given that men rarely offered it to each other in my data.

It was largely women also who were the source of small instances of levity in an otherwise fairly serious, heavy meeting. At one point, when a date for checking a Melbourne IT problem was announced, one of the women called out ‘Hallelujah’ in a mock Southern Baptist style. Later, as the group discussed the issuing of a major report and how it might be judged, a woman looked over the top of her glasses and said, as if she was an indulgent therapist, “And how was it for you?” These small asides caused the kind of disproportionate laughter that occurs when a group needs to ‘switch off’ for a few moments and relax a little. Brief interludes like this also help to bond a group and the discussion is usually livelier and more focussed afterwards.

Taken together, these features of the women’s contribution were reminiscent of what Fishman (1978:405) calls ‘conversational shitwork’, as described in Chapter 2. The women worked behind the scenes, as it were, helping the meeting to progress through the agenda smoothly and supporting good working relations. The four women also spoke now and again but, in this particular meeting, their contributions did not play a significant role in the discussion. One reason for this was that the women appeared to have fewer strategies than their male colleagues for fending off an interruption and ensuring a partly-explained point receives a proper hearing, as in this example:

Example 7

1. Female: Verification activities go straight to the group
2. {control centre and we’ve got a favoured –
3. Male: { That’s
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4. right. Because otherwise the group centre
5. doesn’t have a place it can look to for
6. that follow up. [male colleague continues for several more minutes, female does not speak again]

At line 3, the female team member is interrupted and loses her turn. A similar thing happens in the case below.

Example 8

1. Female: The satellites had a picture of the relevant
2. {bits of the group play which I think
3. Male: { Anyway
4. I'm sure that will come out today.

Again the woman was interrupted before completing her point. During this meeting no woman spoke at length. This is worth noting since, in the data I collected, meeting participants seemed to feel that they had the group’s mandate to interrupt someone who talked too long, going over an already stated point. If such an individual did not have the status of being the senior person present, they were regularly interrupted, even in teams that claimed they had a ‘constitution’ which forbade interruptions. Interrupting a long-winded person did not seem to qualify as an interruption: they ‘deserved’ to lose their turn. However, the women who found themselves unable to complete their points in this meeting had said only one or two sentences when their male colleague jumped in.

Another type of difficulty the women faced was the need, in the typical male-style of meeting, to fully state an argument or line of thinking. This contrasts with the process described in Chapter 6 where a woman might put forward a small, embryonic idea which is then built on by her colleagues until the point is fully developed. In the meeting under discussion, colleagues listened to each others’ arguments in silence. Then the idea was, in effect, evaluated on its merits. If your point is not fully worked out and ready for public scrutiny, you may not be influential in such a setting.

Example 9

1. Female 1: One of the issues we saw was that several
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2. units found they were doing the same
3. things as other units. So they’re going
4. to rationalise it, so they share it out
5. more. So individual units will be doing

6. less verification but the total amount
7. of verification will be the same... It's just
8. that there won't be the duplication... So,
9. emm... I just think that's a really
10. positive thing... We could probably
11. look at that and apply it more,
12. more sort of widely.
13. Female 2: {Mmm
15. Male: We didn't have any situations to
16. manage. None were scripted and none
17. emerged [male continues in this vein for several more minutes]

The first woman makes a somewhat circuitous point about a more efficient process which they should consider applying across the organisation. Her pauses and repetitions are accompanied by glances around the room, a rising intonation pattern, and rubbing and twisting her hands. Altogether, she seems progressively ill at ease, as if she senses the meeting was not 'with' her. Two of her female colleagues come in supportively at lines 13 and 14, but, for her, any positive effect of this must have been outweighed by the fact that the meeting does not acknowledge or use what she said. At line 15, a male colleague abruptly changes the subject.

At the end of this meeting, I spoke to Linda, one of the female executives present, I asked her whether it was typical in these monthly meetings that she and the other women contributed in the ways we had caught on camera. In other words, they were actively involved in the discussion, made frequent small supportive comments, helped elucidate when someone seemed a bit stuck, added a human touch with some light-hearted moments and put forward the occasional small point. However, they did not make an impact. Sometimes things they said were not completed. Sometimes they were
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interrupted and their points were not taken up. Overall, they seemed to be assistants rather than key players.

We looked at some of the footage together on the small monitor and Linda agreed. She also felt that this meeting, while typical in its overall style, was perhaps worse than many she had attended recently. Linda asserted, “I would generally think that the women have a more effective communication style than a number – but not all – of our male colleagues. In my observations of them, I think that women have a better, more frank communicative style.” My response was that it may or may not be the case that the women had a “better” communication style but what we could perhaps acknowledge was that their approach to the meeting had not been “effective.”

We discussed for some time the distinction I was drawing between her use of the word “better” which carries an implied judgement and the term “effective” which signals no more than ‘suited to the situation’, or ‘achieving an intended result.’ Linda felt that she and her female colleagues seemed to fare better in those meetings where they had done some preparation ahead – something which she had not done on this occasion. She described her preferred strategy in the following terms:

“What it actually means is from a female perspective, you have to be quite astute. You would not just introduce a new topic into a forum. You would have done some lobbying before you got into that forum. You need to play a greater tactical game, to actually give yourself the best opportunity of you getting what you think is the right outcome. You need to smooth the way into topics. It doesn’t have to be a lot more time ahead. It just has to be thinking smarter and lobbying because it could actually take you longer, if you haven’t actually positioned yourself in the best possible light.”

Linda stressed that her experience of the need for lobbying ahead of a meeting was helpful for everyone, not just women. Men could benefit from doing this too, as could someone who was newer to the organisation and its culture. However, she felt it was especially useful for women since in her field and at her level, they tended to be in a minority. In effect, she was advocating that collaboration could be located outside of a meeting to compensate for that fact that it may not feature strongly within the meeting itself.
Meetings chaired by men: senior executive team in a software company

When we arrived to film this meeting, the arrangements I had made were altered slightly to accommodate a change in Rick, the Managing Director’s schedule. I was now to interview him first and then film a meeting with him and his thirteen direct reports. This senior executive team includes two women and an employee with an Indian background.

Rick was relaxed, personable and articulate. He talked about the importance of living your values as a leader and demonstrating yourself the behaviours that you expect of others. He spoke with some feeling about his experience that it was harder for a woman to reach a senior level than for a man. Women, he felt, often had to be more persistent and more capable but a leader who was genuinely committed to developing talent, irrespective of where that talent resided, could make a big difference.

“I think it is harder for women all too often. I think we have to actively play against people’s paradigms...But what’s important is the leadership saying: I’m going to create an ‘equal opportunity environment’, and understand what that means and encourage it. With all your people, you have to try to understand where they’re coming from, be a good listener, reflect back so the person feels that, not only you’re listening, but you’re caring about their ideas and what they feel.”

Rick spoke eloquently and even the film crew were impressed. As we moved our equipment to the conference room in order to film the meeting, the crew told me how pleased they imagined I must feel to have captured such a clear example of the kind of leader my research was trying to encourage. What happened next provides a good case for not necessarily trusting an interview. As outlined in Chapter 4, in the discussion of methodology in social science research, subjects may unconsciously hold a view of themselves which cannot be supported by their actual behaviour. They may seek to establish a positive impression of themselves, deploying the ‘P.C.’ rhetoric gleaned from current management texts. They may even lie.

Rick began the meeting by testing his team on the company’s new mission statement. What was it, what did it mean and what specifically had each person initiated in their division that month which demonstrated how well their people were “living” this mission?
Example 9
1. Rick: As you know, we always start the meeting with
2. our mission statement. Pete, how does our
3. mission statement begin?
4. Peter: Innovative solutions?
5. Rick: Good. Mike, what’s next?
6. Mike: Customer-focussed?
7. Rick: Right. By doing what, Bob?
8. Bob: You got me!
9. Rick: What is it we do? It’s 3 words. What do
10. we do? Let’s say it together.

This chapter has examined the openings of a number of the meetings filmed for the present study. It has been argued that how the chair decides to open a meeting signals the ‘interactive climate’ they want to establish and hints at the group dynamics which are likely to unfold within this framework. Certainly, Rick made it clear that this team of senior executives, largely in their forties, was his ‘class’. Sometimes the ‘students’ gave the correct answers, sometimes they did not.

Example 10
1. Rick: If you’re not doing well, would you
2. prefer to be coached or counselled?
3. Others: coached! [a number of voices at once]
4. Rick: That’s the wrong answer! Coaching just
5. focuses on the positives and positive
6. improvements. If you’re counselled you
7. hear just where you’re going wrong. I’d
8. rather be counselled because I’d like
9. to know.

Rick then handed out a draft strategic plan. It emerged that the purpose of the meeting was to go through this page by page and reach agreement on a final document. Rick informed the team not to turn the pages over and look ahead until he told them. It quickly
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became clear that the meeting’s hidden purpose was to ratify decisions already taken by Rick.

“I’d like to walk through what I’ve prepared and I’m comfortable it represents what I want. But I need to know: can we get behind this and propagate it downwards?”

This technique of making his own position clear first, before seeking others’ views tended to constrain open discussion, as when the team looked at Rick’s ideas for a ‘motto.’ Rick introduced the item:

“I really like this wording. It’s crisp and concise. I believe we can all get our people behind this and I’m comfortable with it. But I need to know what you guys think.”

At one stage, about an hour into the meeting, when Rick was half way through a long, digressive anecdote about a vicar, he suddenly lost his thread. His mind evidently went blank for a moment and he looked at the team in slight confusion, “What did I just say?” Half a dozen people chorused at once, “Communicate effectively!” This cue was enough to help Rick return to his story and he continued as if nothing had happened. It was all a little eerie.

There were some desultory attempts to discuss the document but these involved one person at a time speaking to Rick. Team members did not engage with each other. Rick’s use of apparently ‘inclusive’ language when one of his direct reports raised a problem made it harder to pursue a point: Rick seemed to be acknowledging your view but, since your point was immediately swept aside, you were left dissatisfied.

**Example 11**

1. Tony: If we could have the latitude to read
2. into the word ‘customer’ in the document,
3. both internal and external customers, I
4. think we’d have a better chance of selling
5. {it to our people and get
6. Rick: { I understand. I
7. understand the perspective you’re coming from
8. and I’m not uncomfortable with that.

It seemed to be harder for Tony to pursue the point when Rick said he had accepted it. This rhetoric did not appear to be enough for Tony who looked unhappy and said no more. Here is another example of the same ‘silencing’ techniques.

Example 12

1. Ron: Well, just breaking it up. What are we
2. trying to focus our staff on? ‘Market
3. leadership’ is what we need to emphasise.
4. Rick: Agreed. I acknowledge that. Now, getting
5. back to the document, please look at page
6. 23.

Clearly, this was not a successful meeting and there was evidence that the culture of the senior management team, at least, was dysfunctional. Rick’s style could be summarised as an airbrushed version of the traditional ‘command and control’ leadership model. The real purpose of the meeting was to display his authority.

There is a sense in which meetings like this should not cause surprise. As described in Chapter 1, a number of studies indicate that, despite the prevailing gospel of good management being consultative, a much more rigid, authoritarian approach is still the norm in many Australian organisations. It seems Australia is not alone here. In her study of US organisations, Reardon (1995:95) found a majority paid lip service only to more recent consultative leadership models: “Most rule rather than lead, coerce rather than motivate.” Rick is not an isolated case. Indeed, his interview ahead of the meeting together with his small comments such as ‘I understand where you’re coming from’ suggest he had attended some courses or read some books where he had learned how he ought to present himself.

In Rick’s team those who challenged him were the tougher, more resilient personalities or those confident at managing the cut and thrust of the Australian meeting style. The South Asian colleague said nothing at all. The camera we had set on a whole group shot shows several attempts to come in by the women but these were unsuccessful. By
demonstrating what actually happens in workplace interactions, the present study contributes useful information about the potential gap between how leaders may describe themselves and how they genuinely behave. For example, members of this team, interviewed individually after the meeting, confirmed that they struggled to reconcile what they identified as the rhetoric of respect but the practice of control.

Meetings chaired by men: Sydney IT company
From the meeting conducted by Rick and described in the previous section, it would perhaps be reasonable to conclude that many women, people from other cultural backgrounds and some men do not fare well in an authoritarian organisational culture, as that translates into the way meetings are run. But such a conclusion would be misleading. In the data collected for this study, there was evidence that some quite rigidly constructed meetings were nevertheless successful, in that outcomes were reached, everyone contributed and the participants themselves rated the meeting as satisfying.

A meeting in this category was filmed in an IT company in Sydney. There are seven people in the team: Satya (Indian background and the chair), Claire (Australian), Emil (Eastern European), Murray (Australian), Sam (American), Gerard (Australian), Qang (Chinese), and Atiq (Afghani). Satya runs this team as if he were the head of a family. The initial small talk as team members arrive reveals that he knows a great deal about the personal circumstances of each individual and takes a keen interest in their lives. He asks Atiq if his wife has recovered from a cold, whether Gerard’s son made it on to the cricket team, and how Qang’s hunt for a house is going. The atmosphere is warm and relaxed. Satya opens the meeting.

Example 13

1. Satya: I thought we’d talk about Version 21 testing status and what we need to do to get the Version 21 testing underway.
2. I’ve got an agenda here. Basically, first we’re going just to talk about the Version 21 description and what’s happening with it,
3. and then I was going to get Claire and
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8. Emil to talk about the issues identified from previous tests, followed by Qang and Atiq to look at what happened with the MO and the PMS systems. And then get Sam to talk about the automatic test system and what the status of that is. Then go on to see what sort of tests we need to perform, as far as integration and system testing is concerned. And if there’s any other business, we’ll end with that. Just in terms of Version 21… I just thought Murray would just talk about what the status of this is.”

Murray comes in next, with the turn prepared for him by Satya. Indeed, Satya sculpts the speaking turns throughout the meeting. He invites particular individuals to enter the discussion at the point that he wishes and, by the same token, cuts them off when he deems their contribution on an issue to be sufficient. For example, having drawn Murray in at line 20 above, he lets Murray describe the testing status but as soon as Murray has covered that precise point, Satya interrupts, “That’s all from you, Murray. Now Claire what do we know from previous tests?” He interjects during people’s turns with questions if he feels they are not keeping to the topic and even draws in specific individuals just by using a small hand gesture in their direction. The current speaker takes the hint and yields their turn to the person designated by Satya.

What is the effect of this surprisingly authoritarian style? Everyone spoke at this meeting. This is a significant achievement in itself since, for four out of the seven team members, English was not their first language. Qang has a strong accent which at times makes it hard to follow him. He also pauses as he searches for the right word. However, with Satya orchestrating the turns, team members appear to understand that they should not interrupt. Qang finishes all his points and, when he is slightly unclear, Satya asks questions to clarify. He does the same for Emil and Atiq, both of whom have repetitive and digressive styles. Satya intervenes to highlight the main point. Similarly, when the native speakers of English with a more assertive style (in this case, Sam and Murray)
engage in extended sequences of quick exchanges, Satya breaks in and moves the meeting along. As Tannen (1994b:293) comments, sometimes an open style does no more than allow whoever is most assertive to dominate the proceedings. “Running a meeting in an unstructured way seems to give equal opportunity to all. But in practice, conversational style differences result in unequal opportunity.”

I interviewed this team without Satya in order to open up the discussion to include the team’s views on his somewhat unorthodox style: that of a benevolent dictator. In particular, I was curious to know how the Australians in the team reacted to being told, in effect, when to speak and for how long. While everyone acknowledged that Satya ran meetings in a different way from others they attended, it was judged an improvement. Murray, for example, said, “Look, we’re all computer buffs here. We get passionate about our little pet things. I know that if you give me half a chance I just go on and on. Satya won’t let that happen. He just says ‘That’s enough from you.’ It’s a lot better this way – we get things done.”

Murray was correct. The team did progress efficiently through the agenda, finished on time and established a clear action list for each person to take away. However, it was also the case that their agenda, at least in the meeting I filmed, did not require any of the more free-wheeling type of discussion necessary when a team needs to approach a problem-solving issue in a more creative way. Satya’s team members were all involved. Everyone contributed to the talk and so it could be argued that they worked together. But they did not collaborate in the sense of thinking through an issue, employing a shared mental model or cognitive process.

**Conclusion**

Evidence presented in this chapter suggests that a competitive meeting style, where individuals claim a sole speaking turn and use it to assert a well-developed point, can disadvantage some people who, because of gender, culture or personality differences, prefer other approaches. However, the data also show that women adapt to the typical Australian meeting rules and some display high levels of competency with them, although it is not the approach which characterises women-only meetings. Wajcman (1999:8) also finds that women adapt their overall leadership style to the male norm. She claims that women’s presence in a professional world still dominated by men is
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conditional on them accepting male behavioural norms, thus encouraging women to ‘manage like a man’. The data discussed in this chapter show a more varied and complex situation, with female managers conducting meetings in what could be termed a modified version of the more usual ‘free-for-all’ style. They behave authoritatively and are clearly acknowledged as being ‘in charge’, yet they also employ a repertoire of linguistic devices to facilitate discussion and encourage broad participation.

Some men, for example Steve, also employ features of this style and use it effectively to support exploratory talk. The facilitative style appears to be particularly useful in those meetings where participants must jointly construct a solution to a non-routine problem. This begs the question: if some version of what seems to be a female conversational style has business advantages, will demonstrating these benefits lead to better outcomes for women in Australian organisations? This argument appears sensible. In today’s complex environment, more women at senior levels may be advantageous for an organisation, bringing better problem-solving methods. However, this rationale assumes that somehow the interference of bias and gender-based perceptual filters can be obviated. Research (for example, Thimm et al, 2003) shows that women and men tend to be measured by different standards, with a greater range of acceptable behaviours being available to men. In this context, Wajcman’s (1999:77) study of the related area of leadership style has disturbing implications for this discussion of conversational style. She writes, “Instead of producing an influx of women into senior management, it is just as likely that men will appropriate this rediscovered ‘feminine’ style and add it to their traditionally male repertoire.” Men might simply extend their current skill set to include these useful linguistic features, without altering their view of women. The next chapter will explore some of the social psychological factors, such as bias, which can influence both women’s interactional choices and how these are perceived. It will be suggested that rational arguments in support of women’s progression into more senior roles may not be enough.
Chapter 8
Data analysis: the performance appraisal meeting

Overview of chapter
As described in Chapter 4, at the beginning of this research I held several focus groups of senior professional women where I asked how they viewed the question I wished to investigate: why relatively few women progress from the middle to the top of Australian organisations. I explained that, as a sociolinguist, I was interested in what happened in the communication between women and men that might illuminate the research question. In each focus group, the discussion would eventually settle on two issues: securing more of a share of the talking time in regular meetings and ensuring your overall performance in the job is better recognised. Doing excellent work was not enough, these women claimed: you had to make sure your work was recognised and rewarded appropriately.

If demonstrating your capability through contributing in an influential way in regular meetings constitutes the first ‘critical site’ where leadership potential is identified, then successfully managing the performance appraisal discussion must be the second. When someone meets with their manager to talk about their successes and failures during the past six or twelve months, they cannot change those events but they can and do influence how they are evaluated. For example, will partial success in a recent project be judged as evidence of failure or as a developmental milestone? How will the supervisor assess what has happened and what role will the employee’s skill in managing this important meeting play in that assessment? The eventual meaning will, in some sense, be negotiated between the two parties. In this intimate, intense dialogue both people will speak, and both will, at times, be listeners: they will co-construct the outcome.

The performance appraisal meeting, therefore, provides a useful focus where the issues raised in the previous chapters about men and women’s communication styles come together. In the conventionally conducted appraisal meeting, the manager is, in effect, a gatekeeper who controls access to scarce and valued resources, such as recognition and the rewards of coaching, training and development opportunities, as well as financial bonuses. The employee, for their part, must manage rapport, create the right impression
and conduct themselves in an appropriately assertive manner. I wanted to know if men and women handle these challenges differently.

Collecting filmed data on this type of meeting proved particularly difficult because of the sensitivities involved in recording a situation where someone is being assessed. Yet this in itself became a motivator for me: there is a secrecy around what happens in these meetings, with individual team members unaware of exactly how their manager conducts an appraisal meeting with their other colleagues. Given that there are more men than women at senior levels in most professions in Australia, I wanted to know if male managers tend to interact with their male and female staff differently and, if they do, what is the effect of this difference in determining leadership potential. In addition, I wanted to explore whether bias affects how different team members are perceived.

I was able to film four managers in appraisal meetings, each with two of their staff, one male and one female, making a total of eight meetings in this category within the corpus of data collected. In some instances, I was not allowed to film the first part of the meeting where the staff member’s actual rating was discussed but I was able to film the second half when the meeting moved on to establish a development agenda, reflecting the rating. This means that the data sample collected suffers from some constraints, especially sample size. However, in view of the difficulty involved in securing access to appraisal meetings at all, it is important that they are included in the present study, since they illuminate the interaction of style differences and unconscious bias, thus helping to explain the complexity of what happens between men and women at work.

The chapter first provides a context for the data analysis, by drawing forward the relevant themes established in chapter two, in particular those sections where stereotypes and social roles were discussed. This context is used to establish an explanatory framework within which the complex dynamics of appraisal meetings may be better understood. Examples are drawn from a number of the meetings filmed to illustrate the most important themes to emerge and one meeting is analysed in a more detailed way, in order to demonstrate how women’s ways of communicating and men’s evaluation of them work together to contribute to differential outcomes for men and women. The chapter includes reference to people’s reactions on viewing these data in conferences and courses. In the time between completing the training resources and
writing this thesis, I have been able to share these filmed data in many settings. The appraisal meeting which is analysed here in detail is a sequence which always provokes heated discussion. The nature of this discussion in itself reveals the polarised attitudes within Australian organisations to certain characteristics of women’s conversational style. Thus the chapter closes by picking up again the prevailing explanations of ‘dominance’ or ‘difference’ which I raised at the beginning of the thesis and revisiting the controversial question of whether women should simply learn how to become more like men, in order to compete at senior levels.

**Similarity, trust and self-promotion**

The conventional wisdom is that ‘merit’ is a neutral principle, applied without bias to evaluate competence and assess suitability. Candidates are appraised on their job-related capabilities through a systematic process, uncontaminated by personal preference, idiosyncrasy or inclination. Unfortunately, research suggests otherwise. Indeed, there are clear indications that, within many Australia organisations, the merit principle is not widely understood or applied (Burton, 1997a).

As will be argued in this chapter, appraisal processes, the allocation of training opportunities and the awarding of bonuses all appear to be fraught with bias, conscious and unconscious. Wajcman (1999:25) observes: “Managers’ perceptions of job requirements and procedures for assessing merit have been shown to be saturated with gendered assumptions”. There is scope for gender bias to enter the appraisal system at multiple points. For example, criteria can be open to subjective interpretation or, during the appraisal process, factors other than performance may be called into play and influence a manager’s judgement. In addition, features in the design of the performance management system can serve to mediate or accentuate any biased assumptions a particular manager may bring to the appraisal meeting.

It has been shown that most people enter the workplace with well-developed schemata of men and women. These schemata, or stereotypes, link each sex with common behaviours or characteristics associated with men and women: for instance, men as active and independent, and women as nurturing. In an appraisal meeting, therefore, the observation, interpretation, storage and retrieval of someone’s performance may be biased towards the characteristics of any stereotype a manager holds. The research on
social role theory and the division of labour outlined in Chapter 2, suggests that even liberal-minded people, with good intentions overall and a belief in equity and tolerance, are not free of bias and unconscious prejudices. This is particularly so in situations which are experienced as stressful or complicated. It seems that people make the most positive evaluations of and decisions about people whom they see as similar to themselves.

Moreover, a number of studies (for example, Burton, 1999; Karsten, 1994; Byrne 1999) have shown that the operation of bias is frequently more subtle (and so more difficult to track) than simply awarding different evaluations to identical behaviours. Multiple layers of bias may exist. What can happen is that men and women are, in effect, held to different performance criteria. Karsten (1999:16) summarises the problem in the following terms: “Men are evaluated on perceived potential, but women are judged on past accomplishments. Unconsciously, men are assumed capable of a higher level assignment unless they have performed poorly in their current position. Women are not automatically presumed capable.”

A meeting I filmed in a corporate sector organisation illustrates these points. Geoff is meeting with his team member, Peter, in order to agree on a performance rating for Peter’s recent work and discuss his career development. Geoff spends only a brief time reviewing Peter’s performance and, indeed, his leading questions and helpful ideas for Peter ensure Peter need make little effort in the meeting. Geoff suggests, for instance, the career move Peter should make next. His use of the word “we” indicates solidarity and rapport.

“I see that a lot of your focus has been on the consumer side of things. Do you think it would be more rounded, if we went and gave you some experience on the business side?”

Later Geoff even suggests ways Peter might answers his questions.

“Yeah, I see here you’ve now done your MBA. Has that been helpful in positioning yourself and understanding the organisation better?”

There is a sense that Geoff and Peter are comfortable in each others’ company, think about things the same way and trust each other. Kanter (1977) has argued that the overriding motivation in organisational decision-making is to minimise uncertainty. Where identifying future leaders is concerned, this means managers can be inclined to
choose people who most resemble themselves. People often prefer to work with people they trust and with whom they feel some rapport. In her study of leadership, Wajcman (1999:162) found, “The riskier the business environment, the more risky it is to appoint ‘others’.” In this context, a sense of similarity can serve as the foundation for developing trust and overrule more exact performance measures. By excluding those regarded as ‘different’ from key opportunities or senior roles, uncertainty can be reduced and rapport ensured.

When Geoff meets with another of his direct reports, Ann-Marie, his approach is significantly different. The overall balance of the meeting is weighted towards a detailed review of her performance, with relatively little time spent on her future development or career aspirations. Ann-Marie has to defend her record in a way not required of Peter.

Example 1

1. Ann-Marie: Eh, as you can see, I’ve filled in that form, as
2. you asked me, and talked about end results
3. and some supporting comments. As far as
4. implementation goes, if you have a look there,
5. it was delivered on time, as we agreed. The
6. implementation for the pilot was supposed to
7. be in July and a roll-out in August-September
8. for the rest of it, which was done. Um. And
9. we implemented it in all the metro areas
10. and now we’re actually moving into country,
11. so that was a positive.
12. Geoff: That’s a bit behind, behind your time
13. line here. There’s a few problems?
14. Ann-Marie: No, uh, no [sounds surprised] July was
15. supposed to be the implementation date for
16. the pilot, as we agreed, and then two weeks
17. of fine tuning and then implementation =
18. Geoff: = OK.
Throughout the meeting Ann-Marie has to work hard to convince Geoff. Even when she presents the facts of her case to counter his negative assumption, as at line 12 above, he accepts her argument with only a brusque ‘OK’. However, when she appears to have some success in encouraging Geoff to see her more positively, Ann-Marie fails to seize the chance to promote herself. In fact, she minimises the only compliment Geoff gives her in the meeting, rather than building on it to increase the rapport between them.

Example 2

1. Geoff: And with your competencies here – obviously
2. superior performance on the implementation
3. side of things. As far as doing it, it sounds
4. like you’re going pretty well. Pretty positive
5. on that side of things.
6. Ann-Marie: Yeah
7. Geoff: I mean the feedback that I’ve had on
8. that side of things has been pretty
9. positive, which has been encouraging.
10. Ann-Marie: That’s a strength obviously of mine. But
11. there are other strengths – I mean
12. there are other things that I need
13. to work on [laughs in an embarrassed way]
14. which I’d like us to talk about in the
15. development plan.

Ann-Marie loses the opportunity to establish a positive impression of herself as an action-oriented manager, someone who gets things done. Later, when they discuss how she managed her budget on this major project, Ann-Marie states that this was “really well done” but immediately acknowledges the role her support staff played. She wants Geoff to understand that she herself did very little, the credit should go to her staff. Finally, Geoff is interested to know how she rates her performance overall. At the same point in his meeting with Peter, Peter makes a sweeping claim with no supporting evidence.
“Well, I think I definitely meet all the requirements of the role so it’s ‘meets requirements’, if not ‘superior performance’ for the year.” In contrast, Ann-Marie seems much more measured, even tentative, when Geoff puts the same question to her.

Example 3

1. Geoff: OK, OK. Sort of overall, how do you think
2. you’ve performed during the year, you know.
3. in terms of rating yourself?
4. Ann-Marie: Again, as I’ve marked there, I think
5. I meet requirements. I think there were
6. some areas which I probably hadn’t pushed
7. as hard as I could have in the sense
8. that we didn’t get the buy-in from every
9. business unit. I think if I had my time again,
10. that’s a learning experience for me. I think
11. I’d have handled that quite differently.
12. So I think ‘meets requirements’. I certainly
13. kept you up to date with what your
14. expectations were as far as delivering. And
15. when we’ve had a change of direction,
16. we’ve actually talked about that, so I
17. think ‘meets requirements’ is what I
18. would rate myself.

It might be argued that Peter is able to rate his performance as ‘superior’ because he genuinely has demonstrated outstanding capability, whereas Ann-Marie’s lower self-assessment could be realistic: she knows she has not performed particularly well. In other words, their different self-evaluations might be based on facts and are not the product of different, gender-based styles. However, there is substantial research evidence to support the view that women tend to play down their achievements and experience self-promotion as somewhat problematic. Nieva and Gutek (1980), for instance, conclude that a relevant factor is how individuals explain their success. Generally, performance can be attributed to four causes: ability, effort, task-difficulty or
luck. Each of these causes can be characterised as either internal or external, stable or unstable. Good performance can be assessed as repeatable, if the cause of the success is seen as stable or internal. Of the four proposed causes, ‘ability’ is the most desirable explanation, since it fulfils all the conditions of predictability: it is stable and there is an internal locus of control.

These distinctions are significant in helping to explain why the women in my focus groups felt they did not always receive due credit for their performance, with this being attributed to factors other than ability, for example, to luck or effort. Effort is a temporary cause, unlike ability which is permanent and can be carried forward into the next project. Ann-Marie, for instance, attributed her success to non-ability factors. She was lucky enough to have a great team who supported her well. This may have the effect of sowing a seed of doubt in Geoff’s mind: she achieved a result on this occasion but she might not be able to repeat it.

In part, the issue appears to be related to the way in which female socialisation tends to discourage self-promotion and this, in turn, can be reinforced by gender-based stereotypes of women as supporters not initiators. For these reasons, the same high-profile behaviours can be viewed as aggressive or ‘pushy’ in a woman but acceptable signs of commitment in a man. In a recent Drake International study (discussed in Byrne, 2000a) of 300 Australian male and female executives, the women claimed they were hesitant about promoting their successes for fear of being seen as ‘pushy’ or aggressive. They stated that they hoped hard work alone would be enough to get them the promotion they deserved.

For women from many other cultures, especially those in the Asian region, the effect of a socialisation process where female modesty is emphasised can make self-promotion particularly challenging. In a meeting with her manager, Amy, who came to Australia from Hong Kong six years ago, gave only minimal responses when there was an opportunity for her to talk about what she had achieved. I asked her about her lack of self-promotion and she explained it in the following terms: “It’s hard for Asians and especially Asian women to say something good about themselves. It sounds boastful to us and that’s rude. We think it’s better if more senior people see your performance and decide for themselves what’s good. Then they should
say it, not me. My manager – you saw – wanted me to give a business case about why I should get a bonus. I couldn’t say it. I remember when I was a child, a neighbour said to my mother, ‘Amy is a pretty little girl and she seems very smart.’ My mother said, ‘No, no! She’s ugly and stupid!’ I was a bit shocked and upset but then I understood that my mother loved me and was proud of me. She just felt she shouldn’t boast. She would lose face by behaving rudely in that way.”

As well as being hesitant about self-promotion, women can undervalue their performance and ability. Ann-Marie, for example, was quick to deflect Geoff’s compliment by introducing her weaknesses. A recent piece of research focused on the negotiating skills of eighty managers, where half the group were male and half female. The managers were asked to self assess their own performance in the task the researchers had set. Results showed that the women expressed less confidence and less satisfaction with their own performance than the men, although the two groups had not behaved differently during the task and had achieved the same outcomes (Watson & Hoffman, 1996).

In the present study, two middle managers were asked about their ability to manage people, in the course of their respective appraisal meetings with their supervisor. John said, “I think I’m a pretty good manager. I’m fair and consistent. Morale is good and I get results. I’d say overall I’m doing OK on that side of things.” In her appraisal meeting, his colleague, Elaine, was less certain. “Well, I wouldn’t say I was the best manager around. But I think I’m becoming better. I think it’s about timely, effective communication and giving people really accurate feedback and working with them on that. I wouldn’t be the number one manager in the world, not by any stretch of the imagination. But I try. I don’t always get it right but I think that much of the time I get it right. But there’s still room for improvement there.” It is worth noting that some of Elaine’s team members had mentioned her to me as an outstanding manager, highlighting in particular her commitment to mentoring her staff. However, Elaine’s version of her performance painted a different picture.

In this context, the recently published research by American psychiatrist Anna Fels (2004) is useful. She shows the link between ambition, recognition and confidence. There is a virtuous cycle in the life of many successful people, Fels claims, where
ambition causes a person to develop expertise in a particular area. In this learning cycle, recognition fuels the next developmental leap. “Without earned affirmation, long-term learning and performance are rarely achieved. Ambitions are both the product of and, later on, the source of affirmation.” (Fels, 2004:54). She found no difference in the ambitions and confidence of girls and young women, in comparison with their male peers, but, during the first years in their chosen professions, men and women appeared to diverge. She found women had more difficulty than their male colleagues in building relationships with powerful people who could advance their careers. They felt it was distasteful to ‘blow their own horn’, routinely underestimated their abilities and experienced social pressure to restrict their ambitions.

In the data collected for this study, a number of women, but no men, spoke as Shelley does in the following comments about herself. I interviewed her at the end of an appraisal meeting we had filmed, where she appeared hesitant about claiming expert status, despite what seemed to be her recent successes.

“I really appreciated when Jim [her manager] asked me a question or invited me to say something on a particular topic. Maybe I’m shy, I don’t know. But also sometimes I don’t feel worthy somehow. I’m not sure that what I’ve got to say will be interesting or useful. So I was really pleased Jim asked me to say something on that last financial systems project and pointed out my 4 years of background in change projects of this type. I think that helped me to feel what I had to say could be interesting and it made it easier for me to put forward my view of how I handled things.”

**Managing rapport and impressions**

In the brief examples given above, two related issues emerge as influencing how an appraisal meeting unfolds: the ability of the participants to establish rapport and the extent to which the employee is able to convey a positive impression of themselves. These themes will be explored further through a detailed analysis of two meetings where a senior executive, Jeff, was filmed in appraisal meetings with two of his direct reports at a middle management level, Frank and Sophie. It is apparent that both Frank and Sophie wish to manage their respective relationships with Jeff in what they judge to be appropriate ways. After all, in the appraisal meeting, rapport can be enhanced, maintained or reduced depending on employees’ success in handling the socio-
emotional aspects of the conversation. Their rapport, or the lack of it will, in turn, influence their manager’s appraisal (Wayne and Liden, 1995).

Another way to frame this is to see Frank and Sophie as attempting to create desirable impressions of themselves. They will be effective to the extent to which Jeff perceives the strategies each of them selects as being congruent with his definition of what the situation requires. Frank and Sophie must decide what sort of event this meeting is. Their decision at this overarching or macro level will affect their assumptions and expectations about what would constitute appropriate behaviour on their part and which linguistic strategies would be most useful. For example, what will be the most suitable balance to strike between being explicit and indirect; succinct and elaborate; modest and boastful. Finding the right balance between each of these possibilities will help them to build rapport with Jeff and contribute to making a positive impression of their capability. In addition, they will need to assess correctly how things are going during the meeting, so that they can interpret whether a particular linguistic strategy is achieving the results they intend. In the light of data presented in Chapter 5, 6 and 7 of this thesis, I wanted to explore whether gender differences in ways of managing rapport and conveying a positive impression interfere, influencing how the appraisal meeting unfolds. The next two sections of this chapter will examine whether such differences were found in the present study.

**Appraisal meeting: male manager and male staff member**

Jeff’s meeting with his staff member, Frank, begins in a positive way with Jeff acknowledging that Frank has scored good ratings against the leadership capability framework their organisation uses to appraise more senior employees.

Jeff: OK, Frank, on the basis of the performance appraisal and when you compare that with the requirements under the leadership capabilities, I think there is a very good match. You quite legitimately have expectations of promotion into the senior executive and I think you should recognise that."

However, the atmosphere quickly changes when Jeff goes on to detail some problematic aspects of Frank’s performance. In fact, the complaints he outlines are serious matters. He questions whether Frank can deal with uncertainty in complex projects and, in the
face of obstacles, achieve results; whether he can meet agreed deadlines; whether he is able to manage a budget within imposed limitations; and whether he can “push a line” despite opposition. In the appraisal meeting between Geoff and Peter, examined earlier in this chapter, it could be argued that one explanation for their obvious rapport may have been that Geoff was satisfied with Peter’s performance. In contrast, while Jeff appears to view Frank as talented enough to be justified in seeing himself as a senior executive one day, in the meantime, he believes Frank’s performance is below standard in several important areas. It seems Frank will need to work hard in this meeting if he is to be successful in countering Jeff’s accusations and leave their conversation having conveyed an overall positive impression. In fact, Frank deploys a series of assertive impression management tactics to successfully establish, himself as a confident, talented manager worthy of receiving special development opportunities. How he turns the situation around is detailed below.

Jeff picks up particular sections of the leadership capability framework where, he believes, Frank has performed poorly.

Example 4

1. Jeff: There are a couple of issues though in
2. particular, in particular areas that I think
3. you’d be well served to focus on and, as we
4. went through the project work you’d done
5. in the course of the year, some issues arose
6. in my mind that really go to the extent
7. to which you really achieve results – which
8. is a primary category in the capability. And I
9. had some issues there that go to how, in the
10. course of a project, you deal with uncertainty,
11. OK, you then commit to action, you specify
12. corporate objectives and goals and deliver
13. the outcomes. So it’s dealing with that
14. uncertainty and then, I suppose, ensuring
15. closure of the project.
16. Frank: OK. So, you’re a bit concerned there that
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17. I haven’t met the deadlines and closed
18. things off. I mean, are there any
19. examples there of some of the issues where
20. maybe, maybe I didn’t achieve in the
21. way you’d hoped?

Most workshop participants viewing this sequence feel that Jeff has lodged some quite
damning accusations of poor performance against Frank, such that Frank may not be
able to recover. However, Frank first (at line 16) gives a summary back to Jeff of what he
seems to have said. This appears to be a paraphrase but in fact he reframes the issues
Jeff has raised, minimising their size and significance. Jeff is positioned as merely being
“a bit concerned” that Frank may not have “closed things off”. In this way, Frank controls
what he now has to address. At line 19, he asks Jeff for some examples of the problems,
both forcing Jeff to become more specific and also allowing Frank more time to consider
how he is going to handle this situation. Even in the way he frames his question, he
succeeds in reducing the problem still further. Indeed, Frank’s implication is that he may
only have failed to achieve in the precise ways Jeff had expected, the inference being
that he may have achieved in other ways: “…maybe, maybe I didn’t achieve in the way
you’d hoped.”

Already, Frank’s skills in retrieving the meeting from the brink of failure are evident. He
uses a repertoire of classic assertiveness techniques, of the kind taught in popular
management books and training courses. In this case, he forces Jeff to articulate the
exact nature of his complaint. It emerges that Frank’s final project report was two weeks
late, although, Jeff concedes, there was a lack of clarity from other areas in the
department and this caused problems. Frank admits the truth of Jeff’s complaint but
embeds this acknowledgement within, first, a set of excuses and explanations, and,
second, a proposed solution for the future.

Example 5

1. Frank: a couple of..I mean there were some outside
2. influences there that affected that. I mean,
3. I think we, or I, managed those fairly
4. well and we did, I thought I did everything
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5. I could to get it in on time. But I admit
6. it was late. But there were some areas there
7. a bit beyond my control, I guess. But, if you
8. want to be kept informed of those a bit
9. more in the future, then, yeah, if that’s
10. the outcome =
12. Frank: I’ll try.

It is noticeable that there is no apology. Frank’s slightly aggrieved tone in this exchange is of someone going out of his way to accommodate, as best he can, a somewhat unreasonable request. He conveys this effect by declaring his final sentence (lines 7 to 10) in a single breath up to ‘yeah’ in line 9. It is as if he is offering to do Jeff a particular favour, to humour him. It is now Jeff’s turn to seem ‘on the back foot’ and he acquiesces at line 11 with ‘yeah, yeah.’ The next matter Jeff raises is the budget blow-out in Frank’s most recent project. Perhaps, he wonders, Frank cannot manage money properly.

Example 6

1. Jeff: I’ve looked through the latest documentation
2. that’s been provided by our corporate people
3. and there’s a clear blow-out in the budget
4. and I would have expected you to manage
5. the task, you know, much more carefully
6. within the dollar constraints we had.
7. Frank: Well, I think, from my memory, we did
8. manage within the budget and actually
9. came in under budget on that one. Although
10. we did have a redundancy that we
11. had to fund which would have meant
12. that corporate passed that cost on to us.
13. Now, I don’t necessarily think we should
14. be held accountable for the project including
15. that cost. I mean, I met the direct costs
16. and we ensured that we stayed under
Frank’s response this time is in the form of a reasoned argument. He opens by stating his view at once – that they came in under budget. He then goes on to explain a possible reason for the apparent blow-out and assert that the staff redundancy should be subtracted from the figure Jeff has in front of him. He closes by reaffirming his position: he came in within the budget. This is a classically structured rational-linear argument, moving from topic statement, to supporting evidence and, lastly, to summary and conclusion. It constitutes a strong rebuttal of Jeff’s accusation and yet it does not come across as aggressive. Frank has deployed a range of linguistic features which effectively set out his points, enabling him to be assertive while maintaining rapport with Jeff, his superior in the organisation’s hierarchy. The overall impression is one of reasonableness, rather than anger. His first point (at line 7) begins, “Well, I think, from my memory.” His use of ‘I think’ and reference to his ‘memory’ (which may, it is implied, be fallible) softens the rebuttal. At line 13, when he introduces his view of how the staff redundancy costs should be expressed, he says, “Now, I don’t necessarily think that we should be held accountable,” instead of the more face-threatening, “We shouldn’t be held accountable.” Finally, he closes his response at lines 17 to 18 with, “So, uh, I guess I’m a bit concerned if you’re worried.” All these moves allow Jeff the space to back down gracefully by simply asking Frank for a revised spread sheet, to ‘clear things up’. The impression Frank conveys is of one rational, reasonable person speaking to another. They have problems but they can work these through, since they are both drawing on the same resources of logic, assertive language and calm rationality.

Given the accepted view of leaders in the Australian ethos as tough, resilient loners who can take a strong stand against their opponents and win, Jeff’s last complaint is potentially the most damaging. In effect, he accuses Frank of verging on ‘wimpishness’.

**Example 7**

1. Jeff: There were a couple of occasions when I
2. would have thought it was in your interests
3. perhaps, in the overall scheme of the project,
4. to have been a bit more questioning, to put
5. forward your own view, not aggressively or
6. assertively – but to actually take a stronger
7. part in the conversation.
8. Frank: Mm. Yeah. I guess. OK. But we’ve got
9. to be careful. We’ve got to listen as well.
10. We can’t be pushing our point too much.
11. But I thought I did pretty well there again.
12. We’ll have a look at that and see what
13. we can do over the next sort of period, yeah.

Viewing the footage at this stage of their meeting, it is clear that Frank feels a little uncomfortable. At line 8, he shifts his body position in the chair and the camera shot from behind his head shows his shoulders raised and tense. At line 8, he deploys several fillers to play for time, “Mm, yeah. I guess. OK.” His use of “we” in the same line is an effective way of signalling co-membership with Jeff in a shared in-group. “We’re got to be careful. We’ve got to listen as well.” He refutes the implication that he is weak and turns the issue around, reframing it as a deliberately-selected communication tactic, designed to achieve a shared goal. Again, it is noticeable that, despite Jeff’s allegations, Frank asserts at least partial success, “But I thought I did pretty well there again.” However, as before, he mollifies Jeff and implies he will adopt the more forthright stance Jeff seems to expect of him as a potential leader. “We’ll have a look at that and see what we can do.” His use of ‘we’ here is intriguing. Whereas earlier, it functions as a solidarity marker with Jeff (“we’ve got to be careful”) or with his own team members (“We stayed under the budget on that one”), neither explanation fits here. Clearly, this “we” is actually “I”, but “we” has a grand, distancing effect, almost like a royal plural. Frank will accommodate Jeff in a spirit of generous magnanimity.

Watching this meeting is like being a spectator at a tennis match between two well-matched players. Jeff lob some tricky shots over the net to Frank. Some balls have topspin on them, some are sent into awkward corners and some appear to come swiftly out of nowhere. But we see Frank deftly return each one. There is a sense of mutual satisfaction. Jeff has pushed Frank and Frank has robustly withstood the challenge. He
has passed the test of resilient masculinity that this meeting turned out to be and Jeff acknowledges this: “But overall, in the scheme of the capability framework, uh, I think you’re a strong performer.”

Frank, for his part, knows he has passed. In spite of the complaints and accusations, he is nevertheless able to assert that he is comfortable with his performance and Jeff accepts this reframing.

Example 8

1. Frank: But I mean what I’m hearing I guess
2. is that you think I’m heading in the
3. right direction.
4. Jeff: Indeed.
5. Frank: So I’m quite comfortable with that.
7. Frank: OK.

In effect, it is Frank who closes the meeting, his is the last complete utterance at line 5. This move where a subordinate closes an appraisal meeting is unusual and constitutes the only example in the data. It should not be surprising: Frank has managed the meeting, with all its problems, in a way that reinforces an underlying rapport between himself and his manager, Jeff. There is a strong sense at the close of the conversation that Jeff will be able to effectively mentor Frank into that senior executive role one day.

**Appraisal meeting: male manager and female staff member**

The purpose of the meeting I filmed between Jeff and his team member Sophie was to establish a development plan for her in the light of her appraisal ratings against the set of leadership capabilities their organisation uses. Jeff opens their meeting by asking Sophie how she views her own needs. Instead of answering this directly, Sophie explains to Jeff how she imagines her career progression over the next few years. She leaves it up to Jeff to infer from this the answer to his question, causing him to intervene and put it for a second time, “What do you think are your more immediate needs?” From the start of the meeting, there seem to be mismatches in communicative style.
As mentioned in Chapter 4, the philosopher Paul Grice (1989) examines what happens in interactions of this type where someone, in this case Sophie, does not respond in an expected way. He argues that all communication is intentional. Understanding another person is a matter of interpreting their intentions. In this process, people draw in other kinds of information, not overtly expressed but implied. He formulated four conversational principles or maxims to help explain how people can manage to mean so much more than they say.

1. Quantity – say as much as (but no more than) is necessary
2. Quality – be truthful
3. Relation – be relevant
4. Manner – be clear, unambiguous and orderly.

Grice’s framework for conceptualising how speakers cooperate provides a useful framework to help explain what happens between Jeff and Sophie in this meeting. From the start they appear to be slightly at cross-purposes. His direct questions do not elicit direct answers. Instead, Sophie wishes to provide a context to help Jeff understand her career aspirations. She does this in quite a personal way by exposing her ambitions to his scrutiny. This constitutes an interpersonal risk. When someone allows themselves to be vulnerable in a conversation and the response is affirming, then rapport is enhanced: it functions as a solidarity move. On the other hand, if the speaker’s self-disclosure is brushed aside by the listener, rapport is damaged.

Example 9

1. Sophie: OK. Um. Well, I’ve been here for almost
2. six months and I feel like…I’m really
3. enjoying the job. I really like it and I probably
4. see myself staying here for about another
5. year or so. Uh. As you know, I’ve sort
6. of moved around, sort of gone into jobs for
7. a year and I’d really like to consolidate a
8. bit more in the job that I’m in =
9. Jeff: = I think that’s good.
10. Sophie: Yeah. And so I sort of see, say, a year
11. to sort of eighteen months. What I’m really
12. looking for, I guess, is moving into, after that
13. time, moving into another job that’s got a
14. lot more strategic {focus, I guess
15. Jeff: {Mm [Jeff’s face impassive]
16. Sophie: Something a lot more high level, preferably a
17. bit more challenging, em, and, em, I’m also
18. looking to moving into a more senior role in
19. the future [Jeff looks sternly concentrated and, some might say, stony-faced].
20. I see myself heading like – I want to stay in
21. the public service and I see myself heading
22. in that direction and sort of consolidating a
23. career and really making a go of it, so to
24. speak [Sophie wrings hands, laughs nervously]
25. Jeff: OK. Well, I think, I think that’s good.

The reaction of women to this segment of the meeting between Jeff and Sophie is generally the same: they cringe, some call out, ‘No! Don’t tell him your ambitions.’ Revealing one’s cherished ambitions to Jeff seems to be assessed as too risky, given his lack of empathy. There is a sense already of different interpretive frames. Sophie has elected to be open and self-disclosing. In tune with this, she employs those linguistic features already discussed in previous chapters which signal an intimate, informal conversation. These include ‘sort of’, ‘I guess’, ‘really’ and half-formed ‘chatty’ sentence structures. In contrast, Jeff sees the conversation as more formal, less personal and more task-oriented. Sophie does take into account the kinesic clues he provides. His stiff posture and expressionless face are eloquent signals that he does not approve of her ambitious plans. But Sophie does not rethink her strategy for the meeting and may perhaps be unable to do so. In the next extract, she identifies the area where she would like to focus her performance improvement: her tendency to procrastinate. It is noticeable that the topic statement is located at the end of considerable background information.

Example 10

1. Sophie: Um. I guess the area that I – like I
2. feel I do well in, uh, the bit that talks
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3. about – just in the framework – [Sophie points
4. to document outlining organisation’s leadership
5. capabilities] – bits that talk about, you know,
6. ‘productive working relationships’, working with
7. other people, communicating well – I feel like they’re my strengths.
8. Jeff: Yeah
9. Sophie: Particularly like writing and presenting. Um,
10. What perhaps I’m not doing as well, that
11. I can see myself, is that it’s occasionally
12. easier for me to let the bigger, the bigger
13. things slip. Um. So if I’ve got a large project,
14. sometimes I’ll tend to do the smaller projects
15. first and just sort of, with that philosophy
16. of just getting them out of the way and I
17. find that that sometimes leaves me a bit
18. high and dry, I guess, with some of the
19. bigger projects. I realise they sort of crash
20. down all at once. So my main thing, I
21. guess, is really just getting over that
22. procrastination.
23. Jeff: OK, So, {if
24. Sophie: {putting things off! [laughs in a self-deprecating
25. way. Jeff continues to look impassive]

Sophie employs an inductive rhetorical strategy where she presents all the relevant context, background and evidence first, and progressively leads Jeff towards her main point. Again, this is an affiliative device. The shared context assists the listener to relate to the speaker’s thinking so that, when the most important part of the message is finally reached, it has, in effect, been anticipated. This technique can be appropriate when making a request involving some degree of imposition (Sophie uses it for this purpose later) or, as here, where something potentially embarrassing is about to be shared, such as a personal weakness.
The problem for Sophie does not lie in her use of an inductive rhetorical structure per se, but the fact that this is at odds with Jeff’s preference. For instance, it is noticeable that Jeff (and Frank) both use a deductive rhetorical strategy. In this discourse style, the topic is stated directly and immediately. Any supporting information follows but this should not be elaborate or overly personal. In effect, Jeff and Frank employ features of the discourse system which has dominated talk and writing in English speaking public contexts for more than two hundred years. It is a direct realisation of the thinking of Jeremy Bentham, the nineteenth century Utilitarian philosopher. This method for structuring talk and writing informs most manuals and courses on how to communicate in professional settings and can be summed up as: say what you have to say and quit. Relationships are played down and the text or message has the primary focus and authority.

Discourse systems function as complex games with rules which must be followed. If someone, in this case Sophie, does not play the game or, perhaps, attempts to play a different game, they may be rejected. The rational-linear, deductive approach so dominates views on the best way to speak and write that other discourse systems tend to be labelled as confused, inefficient or illogical. It is likely, for instance, that Jeff regards Sophie as all of these. Indeed, many male managers viewing this sequence evaluate Sophie in these terms. This impression is not useful to her in the context of an appraisal meeting.

As the conversation develops, it becomes clear that Jeff has a particular view of leadership which involves being tough with subordinates, pushing them in order to drive results. He feels Sophie needs to develop this kind of tough style with her team.

**Example 11**

1. Jeff: And in terms of the performance appraisal
2. that would be one of the aspects that I’d
3. ask you to concentrate on – in terms of your
4. performance. Taking control of a situation
5. and even to the extent of pushing subordinates
6. to make sure that deadlines are met
7. – the thing is you have to show that you’re
8. prepared to take responsibility for achieving
9. a result.

This echoes those parts of Jeff’s meeting with Frank where he felt Frank should also become tougher and ‘push a line’. The appraisal meeting can be seen as a socialisation event in that a more senior person directs which behaviours are to be developed and which avoided, if the employee is to progress to executive level. With both Frank and Sophie, Jeff promotes a directive model of leadership and urges their conformity to its norms. Interestingly, there is nothing about ‘pushing people’ in their organisation’s leadership documents. In fact, the official advice outlined in their Leadership Capability Framework speaks of ‘nurturing’. Leaders and potential leaders are asked to value individual differences and focus on developing each employee. It is not uncommon to find a gap between the values and attributes the organisation describes as important and what, in practice, is actually rewarded. Sophie seems uncomfortable with the idea of ‘pushing’ people. In fact, in the extract below, she describes wishing to be ‘flexible to people’s needs’, an approach which is, in fact, closer to the text of their organisation’s stated approach to leadership. However, compared to Jeff’s ideal she may be a ‘wimp’. It seems Sophie needs to toughen up, if she is to succeed in Jeff’s terms.

Example 12
1. Sophie: I feel like I’m, yeah, the bit about, um,
2. pushing people to achieve results – there’s
3. something there about – I do feel
4. that something I do is wimp out in that
5. regard. I find that I want to be flexible
6. to people’s different needs. You know – that
7. they may not be able to perform something
8. sort of short term or immediately, so I
9. don’t want to really push people.

Increasingly, in this meeting there are signals that rapport is breaking down between Jeff and Sophie. He is impassive and unresponsive throughout and even when she puts a direct question in an attempt to elicit a positive reaction or affirmation, he answers in a manner that leaves her exposed and alone, as in the following exchange.
Example 13
1. Sophie: I guess I feel quite strongly that I take
2. a lot of personal responsibility for the
3. projects that I do. Do you think that’s
4. true in what I’ve showed over the
5. last...[Sophie’s voice trails away uncertainly]
6. Jeff: Yes. Well, certainly you demonstrate a
7. real interest in what you’re doing.

Being ‘interested’ is not quite the same as ‘taking personal responsibility’. Jeff’s words
might be seen as ‘damning with faint praise.’ Overall, Sophie’s attempts to create a
positive impression and build rapport with her manager have not been successful. When
two people have significantly different communicative styles, as do Jeff and Sophie, a
phenomenon has been observed where, instead of working to repair the
misunderstandings between them, they select communicative strategies which function
to draw them further and further apart. In other words, both parties appear to accentuate
or emphasise those very features of their style which are at odds with the other person’s
demonstrated preference. A loud person will become even louder and a quiet person will
behave in an even more reserved or withdrawn manner. In effect, both people do more
and more of what is currently not working. Bateson’s (1972) apt terms for this is
‘complementary schismogenesis’. In this meeting, it is as if Jeff and Sophie’s
conversation falls into a downward spiral of mutually reinforcing miscommunication. For
example, earlier in the meeting, Sophie took a few moments to arrive at her main point –
something that clearly irritated Jeff. But now this trait becomes exaggerated. In the
following extract, Sophie wants to ask Jeff to help her become more visible. As Jeff
listens, his body language indicates his increasing impatience, even irritation.

Example 14
1. I guess the only other thing I wanted to
2. say before we finished is that – it was
3. something I was thinking about before
4. I came into this meeting and I – it’s
5. with a view to my sort of my career development
6. interests that that I am trying to move
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7. towards higher positions – a concern
8. that I have is that I don’t tend to
9. put myself forward very much in – like
10. – it seems to be that successful people
11. are often very comfortable putting themselves
12. forward in a range of situations and sort
13. of interacting quite comfortably in that
14. sort of scenario. I feel like I’m quite
15. comfortable when I’m in a situation where
16. I’m sort of meeting with people, making
17. a presentation. I’m quite confident in
18. that…It’s just a matter of sort of that
19. visibility in a way or sort of – Yeah,
20. I guess, putting myself forward is sort of
21. the best way of saying it. And I’d be
22. looking for – if you’re comfortable with
23. it – looking for you to, say, keep an eye
24. out for opportunities where I could come
25. along with you to things so that there
26. is greater visibility of what I’m doing
27. and I have a greater opportunity
28. to meet, say, a broader range of people
29. and have access…Does that seem
30. reasonable? [smile, head on one side, twists rings]

In this long speaking turn, Sophie wants to ask Jeff to help her become more visible by allowing her to accompany him to larger events in the organisation where she can meet a broader range of people. However this request (her main point) is delayed until lines 21 to 30. What precedes her request is a layering of background information, such as her description of what she finds comfortable and uncomfortable, together with a series of topic introductions, without any conclusions, for example “I guess the only other thing I wanted to say before we finished is that – “. This exaggeration of what seems to be her usual style perhaps reflects Sophie’s stress at speaking to someone who provides so
little in the way of empathetic response. Jeff agrees to help her, but the agreement is not enthusiastic.

The meeting closes shortly afterwards, leaving the sense that, while Jeff has some performance concerns in relation to both Frank and Sophie, he is likely to be a more natural and effective mentor of Frank. Mentoring Sophie may prove more challenging for him in view of their lack of rapport.

**Should Sophie change?**

At courses and conferences where I have presented these filmed data, Jeff’s meetings with Frank and Sophie provoke intense reactions and heated argument. There are gender-related patterns in these reactions, although, of course, no absolute divide. More men than women find Sophie’s style disconcerting. She is judged to be illogical and probably unintelligent. How could she have become a team leader? What can Jeff do with her, except try to arrange a transfer to another section as soon as possible? More women than men seem to feel compassion for Sophie. They watch her step into a trap, as it were, in the meeting. At each point where she can choose among a number of possible strategies, she is seen as choosing the wrong one. She does not understand how to ‘play the game’. Knowing that all of this is authentic and that Sophie, Jeff and Frank are real people, I even have women come up to me with their business cards, for me to pass on to Sophie. They would like to recommend a book, a course or an approach to her which, they remember, helped them when they were a bit like Sophie. But now they know better: those Sophie-like parts of themselves are kept restrained during the working week.

The reactions of both groups described above – those who want to move Sophie on and those who would like to help her – reveal a similar position. Jeff and Frank are fine the way they are but Sophie needs to change. Everyone is clear about the precise nature of the change required: she needs to become more assertive. If Sophie is to succeed in her career, it is felt, she needs to learn to leave her other way of speaking at the door when she arrives at work. Those employees like Sophie, who, because of their personality, gender or culture, are perceived as ‘different’ need to adapt, take on the prevailing way of doing things and, ultimately, blend in. They will then be successful, it is felt.
For these reasons, the assertiveness training movement, and the ideology on which it rests, is relevant to the themes of the present study. The movement began in the early 1970s as a way of teaching women to speak up for themselves and their rights. In theory, since assertion is properly an acceptable mid-point on a continuum between the two extremes of passivity and aggression, it could have been argued that both men and women would benefit from assertiveness training to ameliorate those aspects of their early socialisation which might not equip them to work side by side in the modern workplace, with its value of equal opportunity. Some women might be identified who would profit from presenting themselves in a more robust and confident way. Similarly, some men might be seen as needing to tone down a too direct or insensitive style. Both male and female employees would meet in the middle as colleagues on assertiveness courses.

However, this has not been the case. The assertiveness literature addresses itself primarily to women and the courses are overwhelmingly attended by women, not men, with many women enrolling because of pressure from their managers to do so. An interesting example was provided by one organisation involved in the research for this thesis. As evidence of his commitment to progressing women’s careers, the CEO proudly described to me how he had initiated a customised assertiveness training program which all women in the company had to attend, unless exempted by their managers on the grounds that they were ‘assertive enough already’. As a number of sociolinguists have observed (for example, Crawford, 1995; Cameron, 1995), the notion of assertiveness, in fact, encodes a male norm that depicts women’s speech as deficient and problematic. The training manuals and programs draw on a stereotype of women but, perhaps more importantly, they provide no research-based rationale for the desirability of these ways of behaving or any evaluation of the linguistic concepts underpinning them.

The verbal rules advised in such materials provide prescriptions about how to structure speech in every situation. For instance, you should speak directly, without hints or inferences. Requests should be matter-of-fact and refusals stated straightforwardly. Speakers should use ‘I’ statements and make their feelings explicit. There is a deficit and assimilationist model implied in such advice.
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Cameron (1995), for instance, has attacked the assertiveness training movement as ‘verbal hygiene for women’ and ‘a genre with a gender’. She sees the movement as reflecting the long history of advice to women on how to talk so that they may be more acceptable to men. In support of this view, Crawford (1995) claims the following: “Because the prototype of an assertive person is virtually synonymous with the stereotype of masculinity, change efforts directed at women were inevitably towards helping women attain stereotypical masculine behaviour. Assertiveness training was prescribed for women with the implicit promise of helping them compete on equal terms with men by adjusting their speech patterns to be more like men’s.”

The advice to be direct does not take into account the interpersonal function of language and implies that communicating information in an accurate way is the only focus of an interaction. The studies mentioned above have examined how assertive speech is judged in authentic situations, rather than the artificially enacted role plays in laboratory settings which tend to characterise much of the research in this area. The findings from studies conducted in natural situations show that the style is evaluated as rude, even aggressive by many people. In addition, reactions vary depending on the gender of those employing the techniques, with negative reactions being stronger if the assertive speaker is female. Cameron comments that assertiveness is a high risk strategy for women.

Conclusion

It seems that the difficulties many women experience in attempting to compete on equal terms with men, together with the pressure on them to blend into the prevailing workplace culture, have led to a view by many men and women that the chief task of female employees is to refashion themselves along more stereotypically male lines. However, when other obstacles to progress, such as underlying prejudices and power differences, are not addressed, women may find that even when they do obey the rules and behave assertively, they may not be evaluated in the same way as their male colleagues. Women can fail by not changing (and so appearing too personal or feminine) and also by changing (and so appearing too abrasive or masculine). Either way, systemic issues, such as appraisal criteria biased towards a tough, competitive style of self-presentation, are sidestepped and the status quo of different outcomes is maintained.
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The chapter has examined how gender-related differences in the ways men and women present themselves in appraisal meetings can trigger different reactions in male managers, who function as gatekeepers. When different discourse systems clash, it is the dominant one which is seen as the norm and those who deviate risk being evaluated as less capable. The data collected in the course of this research indicate that, in Australian organisations, difference is not always valued. Moreover, we may not be satisfied by simply concluding that Sophie will succeed to the extent that we can teach her how to be Frank.

The concluding chapter reviews the findings from the study as a whole, as discussed in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8. These are then related to the research aim: to investigate how the distribution and function of talk in workplace meetings contribute to differential outcomes for women and men in Australian organisations. The implications of the present study for women’s progression into senior roles are detailed and, in the light of this research, a number of recommendations for organisational change are proposed.
Chapter 9
Conclusion

Overview of Chapter
This thesis has examined what goes on in Australian workplace meetings at the level of communication. In particular, the focus has been on what happens between women and men in those regular meetings that constitute the life-blood of all organisations today. As noted in Chapter 1, surveys of middle and senior managers suggest that meetings occupy between 70 to 80 per cent of their time. Thus it is appropriate that meetings should be given status as the most significant form of interaction in the professional workplace. As such, they are a legitimate object of research. Indeed, as Bargiela and Chiappini (1997:6) assert, “Most organisations exist and will continue to exist in so far as individuals come together to talk them into being during meetings.”

The data collected in this study illuminate the verbal and non-verbal strategies meeting participants employ to construct and negotiate meaning, personality, status and, especially, their gendered identities. Certain differences in communicative style between women and men emerge: for example, women tend to adopt linguistic strategies that support a more collegial and collaborative approach to managing others: something that, on the surface, would seem to provide a benefit to organisations. Yet the data also indicate a bias in favour of the more competitive Anglo-Celtic male norms as the ‘gold standard’ to which all managers, irrespective of personality, gender or ethnicity, should aspire. In this way, the structured inequality of the broader Australian society appears to be reflected in organisational life, with dominance frequently explained, indeed justified, by difference.

In effect, the research identifies meetings as a critical site where, as individuals interact to solve problems and make decisions, they also compete for visibility. Leadership potential is identified or, alternatively, dismissed in meetings where participants test their relative standing in what is essentially a “status arena” (Jay, 1999:30). How an individual manages the impression they make on others functions to show case their leadership capability, especially if more senior people are present.
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By examining meeting behaviour, this study contributes to our understanding of why so few women progress into senior roles in Australian organisations. The precise mechanisms that contribute to the preservation of a narrow, homogeneous leadership group are exposed for scrutiny, discussion and challenge. At the time of writing this thesis, a census conducted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) depicts a dismal situation. Out of every ten senior executives in Australia’s top 200 companies, at least nine are likely to be male. In fact, 49 per cent of these organisations have no female executive managers at all. The census concludes that there is simply not enough strategic focus within Australian organisations on advancing women with leadership potential (Brouard et al, 2004:9). An objective of the present study is to investigate this problem and so contribute to positive organisational change by providing evidence-based insights and strategies to advance women’s career opportunities.

In support of this aim, there is a need for specifically Australian data drawn from real life. Overseas studies do not necessarily reflect the Australian experience nor do they address those “peculiarly Australian obstacles” (Sinclair, 1998:8) to change that form part of our social and business culture. In addition, much of what passes for policy and practice has been founded not on data drawn from authentic interactions, but on interviews, surveys and questionnaires alone. Such methodologies, it has been argued in this thesis, are risky since findings drawn from them describe how the subjects imagine they behave, rather than what they actually do. The present research has found discrepancies between these two and shown that individuals can have a view of themselves that is not confirmed by observing their behaviour.

A further point worth mentioning is that, compared with many existing studies on gender differences in communication, the corpus of data collected for this research is quite large: 262 participants from 18 organisations representing a wide range of industries, in both the public and private sectors. The high quality of the filmed data enable close analysis of all the moment by moment reactions which influence how men and women enact their gendered identities. The linguistic strategies they select can be examined and how these influence others’ perceptions of them. Give the quantity and quality of the corpus, it is possible to identify patterns and make certain generalisations which, it is
hoped, will provide a useful antidote to the predominantly anecdotal approach favoured in much of the literature on gender aimed at Australian managers.

In the following sections, the most important findings are summarised and the extent to which they support or contradict existing models is explored, together with their implications for women as leaders. The research findings have already been distilled into training resources designed to promote organisational change and these resources, as well as their impact, are also described. It has emerged, for example, that the data from this study are proving influential, in actual workplace practice, in two distinct but related ways. First, they offer sound evidence on which to base considered and dynamic interventions that support more innovative approaches to leadership development. Second, the methodology of the thesis (close observation of what actually goes on when people interact) is in itself being taken up and providing impetus for change. After learning how to observe reality - essentially, how to become mindful - those exposed to the training approach based on this research report that they begin to notice the daily enactment of power in meetings and feel better equipped to raise with their colleagues the dynamics of what they see. Their sharper and more informed observation in itself produces a critical shift in power. As a result, they begin to take a leadership role in effecting change and it becomes more difficult to silence their perspectives. This impact, over and above any influence the findings themselves may have, has been both unexpected and delightful, from my point of view.

The chapter closes by arguing for the need to broaden the somewhat limited construct of what a leader looks like and what a leader does which tends to prevail in Australian organisations. Indeed, it is suggested that the muting of women’s voices in the leadership debate is not in the best interests of Australia during a period in our history characterised by complexity and discontinuous change.

**Summary of findings**
The Sacks model, with its emphasis on a singly-developed floor, emerges as a strong preference for the organisation of talk in men-only meetings. One person speaks at a time, and turns are exchanged rapidly, with few interruptions or overlaps. This system prevails even during more heated discussion, including where the current speaker is
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interrupted. In my data, men do not appear to like speaking at the same time as others and will tend to stop talking when interrupted.

As noted in Chapter 5, the Sacks model requires judgment and speed. If the current speaker does not select a particular individual to come in next, then any other meeting participant may self-select and the first speaker to seize the floor gains the right to the turn. Consequently it is not surprising that when they describe how turns are exchanged, men talk about the need to ‘cut in’, ‘whizz in’, ‘jump in’ or ‘dive in’, if they are to secure the valued opportunity of a turn to speak in front of others. Such images suggest a vigorous, athletic and assertive style. If Tannen (1986:vii) is right in defining meetings as a ‘turn taking game’ then, for men at least, it seems to require the need to be fit and competitive. Men who dominate the talk in my data focused on getting in fast, actively fending off any interruptions and quickly seizing back an incomplete turn after a successful interjection. Repetition and increased volume, as well as strong non-verbal signals, were used to lay claim to the floor and silence any competitors.

However, it would be wrong to say that men’s interruptive behaviour was always destructive. In fact, when an interruption was seen as useful in progressing the task, it did not seem to cause conflict or a breakdown in the overall system of one speaker at-a-time. Indeed, in problem-solving talk it is perhaps inevitable that there is at least some disagreement as meeting participants work towards agreement. If the interruption was not interpreted as a put-down of the current speaker, it was woven into the smooth flow of the talk, as speaking turns passed from one man to another, much as a ball may be tossed around a circle.

The data collected for this study present a more complex and varied picture of men-only interactions than that available in the relatively small number of published studies, most of which concentrate on social settings. For example, in the professional meetings I recorded, the Sacks model was not a turn exchange system which was easy for all men to manage. Men from other cultural backgrounds emerged as being disadvantaged, if their culturally-based turn-taking norms differed in significant ways from the Australian preference. If they came in too soon too often, they could be judged as overbearing and lacking interpersonal finesse. On the other hand, if they waited too long and so consistently missed out on a chance to speak, they might be evaluated as passive or
lacking in ideas. It would appear that the ‘no gap, no overlap’ style, therefore, suits Anglo-Celt men, not all men.

Similarly, men who are more reserved or introverted may not manage this quick-fire competitive style with equal poise. In my data, such men spoke less frequently overall and could lose their turn before completing their point, if they were experienced as hesitating too long over a word. In this sense, as shown in Chapter 5, turn-taking is about power. A more dominant individual can seize a turn in ways that isolate low status individuals or silence those whose views are not wanted. Those who manage the system most successfully tend to be assertive, Anglo-Celt males: personality and culture emerge as co-varying with gender in important ways.

In contrast, women-only meetings did not display the same adherence to the Sacks model of one speaker at a time. In the data, a single individual tended to hold the floor when introducing a topic, summarising progress, clarifying a point, offering expert testimony, reporting or instructing. But this pattern regularly gave way to sequences of overlapping talk where several (or even many) women spoke simultaneously and shared the floor. At such times, the women engaged in talk where there was no particular owner of a point and, indeed, those present collaborated to co-construct a proposition. These sequences were often associated with laughter and this contributed to the high energy, fast pace and sense of solidarity. There was no evidence that the women in the meetings I recorded had attempted to implement the Sacks model but failed. Rather, it appears that they were drawing on well-known characteristics of women’s social conversation and putting these features at the service of the goal-oriented talk found in professional meetings.

In particular, the style proved an efficient way of brainstorming solutions to complex problems since the focus of activity was the task at hand, rather than a competition for status or individual power. Moreover, since most women had contributed ideas, the final decision had strong support and there was an easy lead into committing to action. For these reasons, the Sacks model proved of limited use in describing the structure of talk in women only meetings.
In addition to overlapping talk and laughter, the women in my data consistently displayed a range of linguistic devices that contributed to a shared interpretive frame, where the role of the group was emphasised and individual dominance, while it existed, was downplayed. These linguistic devices included minimal responses, high rising terminals, latching and epistemic modals. Taken together, these strategies promoted involvement and affiliation. Female chairs too were distinctive in their attention to drawing in quieter speakers and establishing a chatty, informal style that encouraged talk.

However, it must be stressed that the women chairing the meetings in my data still enacted their authority clearly, despite their low-key approach. They generally spoke more often and for longer than other meeting participants, as did the male chairs I recorded. They also spoke at those pivotal clarifying or summarising moments when topics are progressed and, when they spoke, they had no difficulty in commanding attention. They displayed a balance between collaboration and control, connection and status. In this way, the chairs helped to ensure that the women-only meetings still had a linear structure overall, despite their distinctive characteristics.

The data in this study show that women adapt features of female social conversation when engaged in the very different activity of task-centred professional discussion. These features, it appears, are not just suited to the relationship-building focus of social conversation but they can also deliver business outcomes. Thus the data challenge current myths and stereotypes of women generally, and women managers in particular, as weak or inefficient. Indeed, women’s typical style emerges as well-suited to the challenges of complex problem solving in cross-functional teams.

In mixed gender meetings, female chairs employed similar linguistic strategies to achieve similar outcomes. In particular, their use of pragmatic particles (for example, ‘sort of’) and modal forms (such as, ‘could’) functioned to build openness and trust. These devices are sometimes defined in linguistic texts as communicating imprecision or uncertainty. However, in the data collected for this study they carried an affective meaning as markers of solidarity, establishing from the outset that a meeting was informal and relaxed. In this way, the female chairs reduced social distance and emphasised cooperation.
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Women also adopted an encouraging role even when they did not hold status as the most senior person present or the chair of the meeting. They used questions and small supportive signals (such as smiles, nods, ‘mm’ and ‘yeah’) both to draw in a more reserved colleague or clarify an imprecise argument. This role was particularly valuable in meetings where the contribution of a team member from another culture was in danger of being overlooked as a result of that person’s lack of proficiency in English or their culturally-based way of structuring an argument.

Women in mixed gender meetings engaged in more small talk than their male colleagues at the beginning and end of the interactions I filmed. In addition, the nature of the small talk used by women and men tended to differ. Men employed good-humoured banter and jocular teasing of each other, whereas women shared confidences in a more personal, self-disclosing way and their laughter was not a consequence of small put-downs or teasing. The men, it could be argued, laughed at someone or something, while the women laughed together about the vagaries of life. Interestingly, men in teams with significant numbers of women expressed that they enjoyed the more personal atmosphere created by their female colleagues and saw the benefits it had in building trust between team members. However, in teams with more men than women and where the organisation had a more masculine culture overall, women stated their hesitation in being too personal in case this triggered the negative stereotype of women as not serious or committed which, they felt, still existed below the veneer of equality and acceptance.

In meetings with men, a clear finding was that women altered what seems to be their preferred style when working without men. They accommodated to male norms and also employed the ‘no gap, no overlap’, one speaker at-a-time style of conducting a discussion which was demonstrated in the men-only meetings. They did not, for instance, engage in the sequences of overlapping talk found in women only conversations. In mixed gender meetings, speakers presented their ideas in a relatively complete way, with no expectation that their colleagues would work with them to construct a shared argument. Team members needed to be competent in cutting in quickly and fending off a rival, if they were to be able to seize and maintain a speaking turn. Inevitably, this meant that some team members contributed little or nothing.
In fact, in the larger mixed-gender meetings I filmed there was evidence that some women experienced difficulty with this style and its demands. Men dominated the talking time, women’s turns were shorter and they were interrupted more often. The data show that a competitive meeting style tends to favour the fastest and the loudest. It disadvantages people who, because of their gender, culture or personality, may prefer a more collaborative approach. Yet the data also demonstrate that many women adapted to these meeting rules and displayed high levels of competency, although the approach was different from the norms of women-only interactions. Women appeared to be accepted as influential and authoritative to the extent to which they had mastered the male, more competitive approach. Status and seniority, however, gave women the discretion to soften this style with affiliative devices that promoted inclusion and broader participation.

The findings summarised thus far show that, when men and women were working side by side and employing male communicative preferences, those women who were less adept in managing male meeting norms were disadvantaged. They tended to contribute less and so risked being evaluated as passive or possessing fewer ideas, when neither was necessarily the case. However, the data I recorded also provided evidence that bias can operate when male senior managers acted as gatekeepers with the power to give or withhold career opportunities. In other words, a clash of styles was not the only explanatory factor accounting for what goes on and goes wrong in meetings. Male managers in my data appeared to be biased, even perhaps unconsciously, towards those most like themselves – other men.

It is well known from other kinds of data, for example the steady stream of cases escalated to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), that prejudice against women still exists. However, the data collected for this study uncover the operation of a more subtle kind of bias which, because of its hidden nature, can be more challenging to expose and dismantle. In many workplaces, it seems that the prejudice has gone underground.

In consultation with each participating organisation, I endeavoured to select for filming only those male managers with a reputation for supporting women and advocating their advancement. I felt that to record interactions involving the type of men described in the
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harassment case literature would actually defeat my purpose, since any inadequacy or prejudice on their part could easily be dismissed by saying, “Well, he is clearly misogynist and no-one would find his behaviour acceptable!”

In contrast, to examine conversation between women managers and male senior executives, identified as being of good will and well-intentioned, might help in understanding the source of the frustration so many women described in the initial focus groups I ran (detailed in Chapter 4). After all, we do have mechanisms, whatever their limitations, for tackling overt discriminatory practices but people can feel impotent in the face of that subtle, pervasive bias which can become so woven into all that goes on within organisations that we may not even be able to speak about it without appearing weak. For instance, a female manager recounted a conversation where she had raised the matter of bias in the selection process for senior roles within her company, but her concerns were dismissed by the male executive in charge, in the following terms, “If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen!” She was left feeling that her concerns had been marginalised as no more than ‘sour grapes’. Her male colleagues reiterated their claim that if women of the right quality applied, they would be assessed in the same way and against the same criteria as any man.

In this context, I believe the corpus of data collected for this thesis contributes to our understanding by demonstrating how unconscious bias can contaminate the practice of ‘equal opportunity’. One of the senior managers whose appraisal meetings were analysed in Chapter 8 is the current Australian Public Service Merit Protection Commissioner. Discussing how he manages his interactions with his male and female staff members is more influential, as a training exercise, than observing someone who is displaying prejudices that are quite obviously unacceptable. In 2004, a reform agenda needs to include tackling unconscious bias, as well as sustaining an unrelenting pressure on the more well-known areas of outright, unlawful behaviour.

A significant finding of the present study is that women’s ways of communicating plus men’s evaluation of them work together to contribute to differential outcomes for women. This issue is highlighted in those intimate and intense meetings between an individual employee and their manager where their past performance and future potential are discussed. In such meetings, an employee succeeds in establishing a positive
impression of themselves to the extent to which their manager experiences them as behaving in ways that suit that manager’s view of what the situation requires. The male managers in my data appeared to be drawing on a particular interpretive frame that carried with it certain expectations and assumptions about the most appropriate way to manage the conversation. This involved a rational linear argument style, delivered in an assertive way and including confident self-promotion. When there was a mismatch at this level of intention and interpretation, as detailed in Chapter 8, the interaction rapidly descended into misunderstanding and negative evaluation.

At this point, bias disrupts the notion of ‘due process’. A woman who is employing a different interpretive frame and another discourse system is not assessed as ‘different but equal’ but as inferior. It seems that even when we are well-intentioned and regard ourselves as open and tolerant, seeing difference as something positive is difficult. At the organisational level, how to become hospitable to difference is one of the current, most important diversity challenges. The data show that when different discourse systems clash, it is the dominant one that prevails. Inequality and bias, therefore, must be included in any explanatory framework, along with difference. As Henley and Kramarae (1991:109) have commented, hierarchy determines whose version of a communicative situation will be affirmed and whose will be seen as deviant, irrational and inferior.

**Significance of findings: their contribution to current research on women, men and language**

The first of the popular models concerning women and men’s communication styles discussed in Chapter 2 was the dominance theory, expounded initially by Lakoff in 1975 and widely taken up thereafter. Put briefly, this model claims that women use language differently from men because they have been socialised into a subordinate position. However, if dominance was the sole factor explaining gendered differences in talk, power and status would have a predictable effect. For instance, where women hold positions of authority, they would employ the linguistic strategies traditionally seen as masculine and, conversely, when men are in subordinate positions their linguistics styles would change to reflect this lower status.
This is not borne out in the data collected for the present study. While there was evidence of women accommodating to male communicative norms, there were enough examples of women in authority roles who nevertheless employed at least some of the affiliative strategies seen in women-only talk for the dominance theory to be of questionable relevance. Moreover, such women were effective in commanding attention and were seen as appropriately ‘leaderly’ by their team members, despite their use of a softened version of the typical assertiveness described by ‘dominance’ theorists like Lakoff.

The second theory examined in Chapter 2 is often termed the difference model since it explains the differences found between men and women’s language as the product of cultural variation. Men and women are viewed as occupying different worlds such that, when they come together, they inevitably misunderstand each other. This explanation, originally put forward by Maltz and Borker in 1982, has proved influential, having been described in numerous best sellers (for example by Deborah Tannen) and widely taken up by consultants working within Australian organisations. There has been an unquestioning acceptance of the difference model as a framework for examining what happens between women and men in the workplace. The solution for any misunderstandings is seen as greater flexibility and tolerance on both sides. Yet, significantly, when examples of this flexibility are provided, they appear to be assimilationist, hypocritical and even manipulative. For example, Evans (2000:77) advocates that, in order to succeed, women should behave just like their male colleagues, yet be authentically themselves and, by respecting men’s abilities and appealing to their expertise, they should also ensure they, as women, pose no threat to the men in their organisations!

The findings of this study challenge the difference model in two important respects. First, women and men emerge in my data as communicating in ways that are generally similar. In other words, while there are differences and those differences are significant, the analogy of two cultures or two worlds is overly simplistic and cannot be sustained. For example, in my data both men and women run their meetings according to an overall linear structure, with issues introduced and progressed in sequence from beginning to end. They are not ‘Mars’ and ‘Venus’ speaking two utterly different languages, doomed to misunderstand each other despite good will and good intentions. Many populist
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notions proffer superficial, sensationalist views where similarities are minimised and differences exaggerated.

Second, the difference model ignores power and the backdrop of structured inequality against which relations between men and women are played out. They are not ‘different but equal’. In this sense, I would argue, along with researchers such as Troemel-Ploetz (1991), that if power is ignored, no talk can properly be understood. Taking film crews into Australian organisations and recording everyday talk as I have done, underscores that Anglo-Celt male communicative preferences represent the norm or ‘gold standard’ against which individuals are evaluated and deemed suitable or wanting.

Yet this two cultures or difference model has found great appeal and acceptance in Australia where it has become unfashionable to talk about power and dominance. Sinclair and Wilson (2002:106) have described an Australian organisational ideology bent on camouflaging power differences in order to promote conformity to a leadership construct “which can only be exhibited by and recognised in a small elite of monocultural men.” They sum up this tendency as a “200 year attachment to the mythology of egalitarianism.” Indeed, there is something seductive about an argument which claims that all groups are treated equally, with any opposing view experienced as confronting. For example, those findings in the present study that unveil some of the more subtle forms of bias and discrimination in Australian organisational life tend to provoke intense reactions in training course participants viewing the data. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, Australians like to think of themselves as tolerant and egalitarian although the reality is often darker and more complex. Moreover, if no-one is at fault, arguing for a maintenance of the status quo is much simpler. In contrast, when male-female misunderstandings are analysed within a context of male power and female subordination, the notion of an innocence of intent begins to collapse. The ‘different but equal’ model then begins to look like a useful way of sustaining existing hierarchies, inequality and dominance.

A final model that currently enjoys considerable support is that captured by the rhetoric of ‘managing diversity’. According to this theory, every employee is unique and different in their own way. Equality can best be achieved by treating everyone as an individual. The implication is that no particular group experiences disadvantages which need to be
addressed. Gender as a construct, therefore, ‘floats free’ (Cameron, 1997: 31) of the social context and the new focus is on individual empowerment.

However, personality and individualism do not sum up the whole of our psychological identity. This also has a group component. Our memberships of different groups (such as English-speaking, Australian or male) help to explain the dynamics of what happens when different sorts of people interact in organisations. Group identities have a fundamental role here. Yet those who are members of the dominant, in-group often do not regard themselves as possessing any group identity – only outsiders, it is felt, belong to an identifiable group. For example, in my research it was quite common for men to see the category ‘gender’ as something relevant for women, whereas they, as men, did not have gendered identity. Similarly, any discussion of ‘culture’ as a variable was assumed to concern people other than Anglo-Celt Australians, who tended not to perceive themselves as culturally-loaded.

Yet the research of psychologists such as Turner (2001) emphasises that, if we are to understand the intricate social workings of bias and prejudice, we need to acknowledge the role of categorisation. Individuals are experienced as members of a social group where similarities are accentuated in order to achieve cohesion. In this way, group differences are more fundamental than individual differences where prejudice is concerned. Similarly, a leader needs to be seen as prototypical of the group, the person who best represents what we feel we have in common.

The notion of ‘managing diversity’ (or ‘productive diversity’), as it is commonly applied, ignores group identity and implies that, where gender is concerned, there are few, if any, patterned differences between men and women. This is not supported by my data. In addition, by glossing over inequalities among different groups, this model sanitises the truth and leads to what Bertone and Leahy (2003:109) rightly identify as “an inappropriate reliance on individual solutions to systemic problems.” Each woman is viewed as being alone in tackling her unique problems in her own individual way. My data do not support this particularist view, since both group identities and group-directed bias were found to be salient in unraveling the complexity of what goes on between women and men when they interact in professional meetings.
The dominance and difference models, together with the current emphasis on individual empowerment through the policies and practices of ‘managing diversity’ are all three challenged by the findings presented in this thesis. People’s experience of Australian organisations emerges as more varied than many of the earlier research studies suggest and certainly more than is captured in the three main approaches which have influenced the discourse on gender and language over the last twenty-five years. The interconnected roles played by difference, power and prejudice demonstrate that all three factors are implicated and, therefore, all need to be included in any interventions aimed at effecting change. Taken together, the data suggest a reality that is more complicated and multi-faceted than can be constrained by a simple model.

Implications of findings for women’s progression into senior roles

In the six years between setting out on this research journey and arriving at a destination of sorts (marked by this final chapter), there has been an increasing focus on our lack of female leaders, with more academic and popular accounts of the problem being published. For example, the management journal ‘Fast Company’ recently featured an article based on interviews with female executives, entitled ‘Where Are the Women?’ (Tischler, 2004). The issue is summed up in the following terms:

“...It wasn’t supposed to turn out this way. By 2004, after three decades of the women’s movement, when business schools annually graduate thousands of qualified young women, when the managerial pipeline is stuffed with capable, talented female candidates for senior positions, why are there still so few women at the top?”

The question posed by Tischler is explored in this thesis by illuminating what actually happens in the routine interactions between men and women in the Australian workplace, such that relatively few women are identified as sufficiently capable and talented to be seen as potential leaders. It must be reiterated that other factors, outside the scope of this study, are involved, such as the failure of organisations and society generally to adequately support women wishing to pursue a career and raise small children. However, the particular contribution provided by this thesis to what is a complex matter is to expose for scrutiny a dimension that is usually hidden: the precise nature and operation of the obstacles women face in the professional workplace.
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This point is significant given that the majority of studies on the topic are anecdotal and based on interviews where men and women recount their individual stories. Such stories are inevitably open to challenge as being too subjective and lacking rigour. The corpus of data collected for this thesis puts flesh on these bones by demonstrating exactly how the problem is created and maintained. The data can be shared and people invited to make up their own minds.

For instance, a newly-published study (Chesterman et al, 2004) uses interviews to explore the experiences of senior executive women in Australian organisations. Based on the opinions of their subjects, the authors claim that women are more collegial, consultative and approachable in their management style, although they face barriers to their advancement since competitive, stereotypically masculine behaviours are still rewarded. Questions such as the following could be posed: are women actually more collegial? If so, how do they achieve this and to what effect? If workplaces are still deeply gendered, what does this mean in practice and where could we begin, if we wanted to change the situation? These questions, and others related to them, are difficult to answer, drawing on anecdotes alone. However, when precise information of a detailed and objective nature is used to flesh out such general claims, then we begin to be equipped to design a blueprint for change interventions which, because they effectively target the causes of the problem, are more likely to succeed. The present study, I believe, can play a powerful diagnostic role in relation to a malaise which has for too long avoided rigorous scrutiny.

That our organisations are deeply gendered and that our notions of leadership come drenched with gender are facts widely known and broadly accepted by researchers, despite the comfortable, even complacent, belief in gender neutrality held by many Australian managers. What we have lacked are data showing how this is perpetuated in daily conversation and how the problem might be tackled, beyond the broad sweep of policy that, after three decades, has still not delivered the results for which women of my generation campaigned.

Applying the findings to support change
The narrative of my research journey, recounted in Chapter 4, makes it clear that research of this type is expensive and time-consuming, thus requiring sponsorship,
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particularly if, as in my case, the researcher is not an academic attached to a university and thus eligible to apply for funding through existing grant processes. Sponsors like deliverables and are less interested in documents such as a thesis than in materials of immediate and practical use within training programs.

However, there is an additional reason this research was designed from the outset to be disseminated through the vehicle of training resources. I am comfortable in declaring myself to be a social activist, committed to positive change. I have found provocative and inspirational the writing of those authors mentioned in Chapters 2 and 4 who make a connection between scholarship and a desire to change the status quo (for example, Cameron, 1991). The principles behind the design of this kind of research include:

- Persons are not objects and should not be treated as objects;
- Subjects have their own agendas and research should try to address them;
- If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing.

Given this context, it makes sense that the most significant findings yielded by this research effort have already been distilled into three videos and their accompanying handbooks. Two of these resources, have been submitted along with this thesis, not in fulfillment of the degree requirements, but simply to share some of the filmed data easily and provide a reference point for this section of the thesis. Perhaps I am in a fortunate position in that I can write about the impact and use of my findings over the last four years, rather than simply recommending how others might hypothetically care to deploy them, as may be more common at this point in a thesis.

Currently, fifty-six Australian organisations, representing a cross-section of workplaces in both the public and private sectors, are using these resources as part of their regular leadership and management programs. In addition, I’ve presented my findings and shared parts of the resources to audiences at twenty-two conferences and workshops. I also draw on them continually in my work as a management consultant, focusing on senior executive education.

The purpose of the training packages is to provide individuals and organisations with an authoritative, research-based but user-friendly way of exploring how gender (and other variables) influence teamwork and leadership. The videos provide short extracts drawn
from the corpus of data, highlighting the most significant findings and an extended essay at the beginning of each handbook brings together a rich set of research studies. Both the videos and the essay are then drawn into the practical activities and discussion topics detailed in the handbooks. In this way, the aim is to equip an internal or external consultant to handle complex issues with confidence. In the design of the resources, for instance, I did not assume either knowledge of the issues involved or expertise in designing effective training. The resources are, in effect, a ‘one stop shop’ providing everything necessary to broach a challenging topic confidently.

The resources have enabled the research findings to reach a wider range of people than a thesis alone could have done. In the feedback I receive, from individuals and organisations, there are five themes which consistently emerge:

- The arguments provided in the introductory essay helped to enlist the senior level commitment essential for any change initiative;
- The use of the training resource assisted in developing the practical skills that underpin inclusiveness;
- The broad range of studies mentioned helped people understand that changing an organisation’s culture is a long, complex process requiring action on multiple fronts;
- After a program based around this material, there was greater commitment to introducing other, related initiatives, such as making managers more accountable for diversity measures;
- The experience of using the materials promoted more willingness to take risks in appointing women to key roles and managing those risks through coaching/mentoring programs.

These impacts have been rewarding for me to learn about and notice for myself in my own work. However, there is a further, much more unexpected way this research is proving useful to those who come across it: that is, through taking up its methodology of observation and analysis. This is the dimension most frequently mentioned in feedback as influential over the long term.

Watching the video extracts and being taken through a structured sequence of exercises and activities related to them appears to provide people with a questioning mindset and
some tools for analysing what they see. This two-fold approach of observation then analysis helps people to challenge the usual way they do things and enables them to speak up more confidently when something does not seem right.

Of course, understanding more clearly the things that happen in routine interactions and how they can work to reproduce inequality cannot of itself cure prejudice or eliminate discrimination. However, by heightening learners’ ability to notice what is going on, it can support those people of good will who do not wish to unconsciously enact bias in ways that lead to differential outcomes for women and men: it makes it more difficult for prejudice to remain underground.

If real change is our objective, we cannot limit ourselves to those interventions designed, from the best of intentions, to encourage women to further accommodate to men. This, I would argue, is unjust, implies deficiency and paves the way for assimilationist approaches. For instance, at the time of writing this chapter a well-known corporate sector organisation has asked me to provide some coaching to a talented woman about to apply for a critical senior executive role. They would like to see many more women moving into senior positions than currently do. Therefore, in order to help this female candidate maximise her chances, they would like her to be helped to adjust the way she presents herself so that she can come across as tough enough and ambitious enough to be evaluated as suitable. There was no suggestion that those assessing the candidates might usefully review their expectations and assumptions, and challenge whether their narrow constructs of leadership might block their ability to see the leaders in front of them, with their diversity of abilities and styles.

The late Clare Burton wrote extensively (for example, 1987 and 1991) showing how ‘merit’ is, unfortunately, not an objective measure but is frequently distorted to help mobilise masculine bias. More recently, Sinclair (2002:66) has pointed out, “Merit comes to carry, invisibly, all of a dominant group’s assumptions about what looks like good performance. And typically these are characteristics that the dominant group itself possesses and prides itself on – toughness, endurance, resilience, ambition, willingness to work long hours.” The result, she argues, is that instead of identifying talent we perpetuate the status quo.
While it is true that organisations need to introduce policies and procedures that promote good practice and outlaw unacceptable behaviour, it is in face-to-face interactions that those policies are implemented - or not. Encouraging people to notice what goes on and goes wrong in their regular interactions helps them to challenge what they see, including challenging their cherished views of themselves as open, unbiased and well-motivated. In my experience, this can be quite threatening.

In this way, I am finding that both the data I have collected and the way I have analysed them function as a powerful pedagogic tool, supporting the kind of vigilant observation akin to the Buddhist notion of ‘mindfulness’ (see for example Thich Nhat Hahn, 1991 and 1999). Essentially, this practice involves using attention and observation to help us to think differently. The act of paying attention empowers the person who is mindful. Indeed, rather than helping someone to think differently, it actually supports seeing before thinking even steps in. Thus, by disrupting the usual patterns of thought, fresh insight becomes available: people are freed, enabled and enlarged in subtle but distinct ways.

A further but related application of the findings which I have found surprising is the eagerness with which people want to learn about and use a straightforward version of the analytical framework typically employed in sociolinguistics. It seems that this provides a useful, and previously lacking, shared metalanguage enabling people to talk about their observations in a reasonably objective way – and so be heard. The framework I have found most useful for this purpose is that proposed by Roberts (1983).

| Dimension 1. **Schema:** knowledge and assumptions brought to the interaction. |
| Dimension 2. **Frame:** strategies for and interpretation of what is going on in the interaction. |
| Dimension 3. **Discourse management and style:** uses of language, such as turn-taking and topic control. |
| Dimension 4. **Syntax, lexis and prosody:** forms of language, such as use of modals to express indirectness or use of tone to convey meaning. |

the bottom up.
On leadership courses, this process of learning how to observe, and how to analyse what they observe, acts as a springboard for participants, helping them, for instance, to become confident enough to want to record themselves in one of their own regular meetings. They can then examine together their own practices and reflect on the extent to which these support or hinder what they are trying to achieve. In this way, they develop greater insight into the complexity of meetings, the way impressions are formed, and how these lead to evaluations of character and ability. As a team works together to solve problems and make decisions, they learn to focus on both task and process simultaneously. Thus they gradually build their capacity to manage the messiness and complexity of the here and now, and to demonstrate more convincingly espoused values of respect and inclusiveness. Working directly with what is going on moment to moment generally proves much more demanding – and more rewarding - than reflecting on leadership mainly through studying the latest international theories. By learning some of the tools of my ‘trade’ (close observation and analysis), people appear to experience a significant raising of consciousness and a heightened curiosity. While my findings intrigue and engage, it is the method of my thesis that perhaps has the most enduring impact.

**Closing remarks**

This thesis has explored the precise ways in which narrow, traditionally masculine ideas about leadership potential are enacted and reproduced in regular workplace meetings. Women’s communicative preferences, with their emphasis on collegiality and collaboration, emerge as particularly suited to the complex problem solving and discontinuous change of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, there is still a bias towards male norms and the traditional masculine view of leadership which have the effect of excluding other versions of organisational reality. Women’s differential treatment is sanitised as simply a misunderstanding between Mars and Venus, with the solution being that more of those women who can ‘manage like men’ (Wajcman, 1999) can be co-opted into the senior ranks, as a reward.

The limitations and inequalities of existing practices affect not only many women, but also potential leaders from other cultural backgrounds and those men less comfortable with the prevailing tough, competitive ethos. In this sense, current practices are out of step with the reality of Australian organisations, where diversity is now woven into the
fabric in such a way that the old ‘business case’ arguments have begun to sound antiquated and beside the point. We can no longer choose whether or not we want to be diverse, or even whether we think being diverse is good or bad: we simply are and we cannot go back.

Evidence from studies not focused on the career progression of women (for example, Collins, 2001) highlights that the leadership models of the last century are unlikely to equip us to meet the significantly different problems of this one. Yet we cling to the old approaches and bias lingers, like a bad smell, preventing us from ‘doing leadership differently’ (Sinclair, 1994). Typically, we still select leaders who emphasise control rather than inclusion, competition not collaboration and the status quo over innovation. This leadership defines itself through images of combat and athleticism. Despite signals that these traditional approaches are increasingly bankrupt, we find ourselves with a leadership culture committed to its own continuance. This thesis has sought to map the subtle mechanisms of intolerance as these are displayed in the silencing of women’s ways and women’s voices in workplace talk. If we are to deal well with this challenging century, we cannot afford to recognise and measure potential in ways that deprive us of half our talent.
## APPENDIX

Meetings and Interviews Documented on Video,
as Described in Methodology Section, Chapter 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Function of Team Interviewees</th>
<th>Gender and Ethnic Origin of Team Members</th>
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<td>Abel Constructions</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>1. Project engineers’ team</td>
<td>8 Australian (8M)</td>
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<td>Australian Public Service Commission</td>
<td>Public Service</td>
<td>1. Development meeting</td>
<td>2 Australians (1F, 1M)</td>
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<td>2. Development meeting</td>
<td>2 Australians (2M)</td>
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<td>BP</td>
<td>Mining, industrial</td>
<td>1. International team – sub-group</td>
<td>1 Australian (M)</td>
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<td>1 Malaysian (M)</td>
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<td>2. International team – sub-group</td>
<td>2 Australians (1F, 1M)</td>
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<td>Centrelink</td>
<td>Public Service</td>
<td>1. Rural and housing team</td>
<td>1 Indian (M)</td>
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<td>6 Australian (3F, 3M))</td>
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<td>2. Administrative law team</td>
<td>6 Australians (6F)</td>
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<td>3. Management team</td>
<td>4 Australians (2M, 2F)</td>
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<td>Department of Finance</td>
<td>Public Service</td>
<td>1. Senior management team</td>
<td>4 Australians (F)</td>
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<td>2. Contract team meeting</td>
<td>2 Australians (1F, 1M)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Department</td>
<td>Group Description</td>
<td>Composition</td>
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<td>Greer Industries</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>1. Supervisors’ Team</td>
<td>3 Australians (1F, 2M) 1 Filipino (M) 1 Turkish (F) 1 Bangladeshi (F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harlequin Enterprises</td>
<td>Publishing</td>
<td>1. Management Team</td>
<td>3 Australians (1F, 2M) 1 Chinese (F)</td>
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<td>Hewlett Packard</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>1. International sales and marketing team</td>
<td>2 Australians (1F, 1M) 1 Indian (M) 1 Chinese (M)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lochard Environment Systems</td>
<td>Software</td>
<td>1. Research engineering team</td>
<td>4 Australians (4M) 1 Indian (M) 1 US (M) 1 Italian (M) 2 Australians (2M)</td>
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<td>2. Project team for Geneva</td>
<td>1 Indian (M) 1 Russian (F) 1 Hungarian (F) 2 Australians (1F, 1M)</td>
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<td>3. Programming team</td>
<td>1 Chilean (M) 1 Hong Kong (F) 1 Malaysian (F) 2 Australian (2F)</td>
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<td>4. Client relationship team</td>
<td>1 Vietnamese (M) 7 Australians (3F, 4M)</td>
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<td>Maribyrnong City Council</td>
<td>Local government</td>
<td>1. Councillors’ meeting</td>
<td>1 Lebanese (M) 2 Australian (2M)</td>
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<td>Multicultural Marketing</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>1. Product development meeting</td>
<td>1 Vietnamese (M) 7 Australians (3F, 4M)</td>
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<td>NSW Migrant Advice Centre</td>
<td>Public service</td>
<td>1. Workplace advice meeting</td>
<td>1 Australian (F) 1 Indian (F)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Meeting Type</td>
<td>Participants</td>
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<td>Prestige Group</td>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>1. Die casting team</td>
<td>1 Turkish (M), 1 Australian (F), 1 New Zealand (F), 1 Croatian (M), 1 Italian (M), 1 Greek (M)</td>
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<td>2. Bakeware team</td>
<td>1 Turkish (M), 1 Mauritian (F), 1 Lebanese (M), 2 Australian (2F)</td>
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<td>3. Engineering team</td>
<td>1 Turkish (M), 1 Israeli (M), 1 Philippines (F)</td>
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<td>4. Administrative team</td>
<td>1 Australian (F), 1 Greek (M), 1 Indian (M)</td>
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<td>Qantas</td>
<td>Aviation</td>
<td>1. Flight centre catering managers</td>
<td>4 Australians (4M)</td>
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<td>2. Flight centre contract meeting</td>
<td>2 Australians (2M), 4 Japanese (4M)</td>
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<td>3. Qantas College – executive managers’ meeting</td>
<td>3 Australians (3M)</td>
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<td>4. Qantas College – executive managers’ meeting</td>
<td>3 Australians (3F)</td>
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<td>St James Ethics Centre</td>
<td>Not for profit</td>
<td>1. Leadership team</td>
<td>3 Australians (2F, 1M), 1 Indigenous Aust. (M)</td>
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<td>Telstra</td>
<td>Telstra Telecommunications</td>
<td>Telstra Telecommunications</td>
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<td>1. CEO leaders team</td>
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<td>4 Australians (1F, 3M)</td>
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<td>1 Italian (M)</td>
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<td>2. International marketing team</td>
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<td>5 Australians (1F, 4M)</td>
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<td>1 Indian (M)</td>
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<td>3. Indonesian project team</td>
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<td>2 Indonesian (1F, 1M)</td>
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<td>2 Japanese (2M)</td>
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<td>3 Australians (3M)</td>
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<td>4. Project management (client relations team)</td>
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<td>4 Australians (4M)</td>
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<td>5. Offshore female managers’ meeting</td>
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<td>3 Australians (3F)</td>
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<td>6. Contract meeting</td>
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<td>9. Intelligent networks team</td>
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<td>4. Women in business team</td>
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### Workplace Meetings and the Silencing of Women

<table>
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<th>5. Human resources team</th>
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### Summary of Data

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References


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