

23 Communicating Gendered Professional Identity: Competence, Cooperation, and Conflict in the Workplace

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1 Introduction

Job profiles and work organization are changing rapidly. Driven by new technology and Internet-based communication, the concept of the “virtual company” influences professions, such as tele-work and on-line project management, worldwide. Presumed changes in the working world not only concentrate on technology-based communication but also raise hopes for more female participation in the workforce. To date, however, sex segregation has been one of the “backbones of social stratification and inequality” (Achatz, Allmendinger, and Hinz 2000: 2).

Explanations for sex segregation are various. Apart from the classical “barriers” theories based on social inequality (Luzzo and Hutcheson 1996), there are theories about the cultural dimensions of gendered organizations and employment gratification (Hultin and Szulkin 1999), and concepts which focus more on the political system and its influence on equal opportunity in different countries (von Wahl 1999). Success and failure in professional careers is often perceived as a result of multidimensional influences. Many women experience the effects of sex segregation: they are confronted, for example, with gender stereotypes, gendered expectations, and their related behavioral manifestations. Contrary to expectations, these have changed surprisingly little over recent years (Jacobs 1995; Eckes 1997). In a large international study on the “typical man/woman,” Williams and Best (1986) found scarcely

any changes compared to a study by Broverman et al. (1972), undertaken almost twenty years earlier.

In this chapter we explore the hypothesis that gendered attitudes and expectations toward women and men influence not only gender roles and self-perception, but also *communication styles at work*. We begin by asking how women and men judge the function of verbal interaction in terms of career and professional life in general, and how they perceive themselves in situations of conflict, competence, and cooperation. Earlier research suggests that experiencing negative communication at work can cause frustration and may lead to reduced self-esteem. Our empirical work builds on this research, examining the influence of interpersonal relations and communication styles at work on women's professional development.

2 Gendered Organizations and Gender Stereotypes

Researchers such as Kanter (1977) and Acker (1991) characterize organizations as engaged in *gendered processes*, in which both gender and sex are regulated through a gender-neutral, asexual discourse. While Acker holds the position that gender differences are not emphasized sufficiently, Reskin (1993) regards gender differences as overemphasized, at least in some organizational contexts. We believe that verbal communication at work influences the professional performance of men and women in gender-specific ways, and that the communication of *social categories* plays an important part in the construction of gendered professional worlds. Social categories – such as age or gender – are related to social values and attitudes which underlie social stereotypes. These influence identity processes, beliefs of self-efficacy, and, consequently, professional success. How, and to what effect, social stereotypes are communicated has been an issue in socio-psychological research for many years (Eckes 1997), and has also become an important issue for sociolinguistics (Talbot 1998; this volume).

In line with Robert Merton's theory of the "self-fulfilling-prophecy" (1948), a theory which was supported by Rosenthal and Jacobson's (1968) findings regarding a teacher-expectancy effect, a number of studies have shown that the way people treat each other is largely determined by their expectations. The explanation for these effects seems to be quite simple; as Snyder (1981) states, how others present themselves to us is largely a product of how we first treat them.

Expectations are influenced by personal and social experiences, stereotypes, and general attitudes (Blanck 1993). Like other kinds of expectations, gendered expectations are subject to situational variation. In addition to individual characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, personality traits, attitudes, group membership, and so on, situational factors such as relative

status, power, and position in a hierarchy may also contribute to the formation of expectations. Deaux and LaFrance regard gender stereotypes as “the most fundamental aspect of the gender belief system, both in terms of their durability over time and their pervasive influence on the other aspects of the system” (1998: 793).

One important way to convey those stereotypes is through language, particularly in face-to-face situations.

3 Social Categorization, Stereotypes, and Language

Linguistic research on “women’s language” has been a very productive component of gender research more broadly. The earliest language and gender research (e.g. Lakoff 1975; Kramer 1975) identified ways in which women’s and men’s patterns of verbal interaction reflected male dominance in society as a whole (see overview in Talbot 1998; Crawford 1995). In mixed-gender conversations, women were typically interrupted more often, for instance; they needed to devote greater effort than men to get attention for their topics; and in general, women conversationalists did not receive the same degree of verbal support as their male interlocutors (Fishman 1978). A good deal of subsequent research confirmed these patterns of male dominance in verbal interaction with females (e.g. Tannen 1995; Woods 1988; Watts 1995). It is worth noting, however, that this approach tends to present women as inactive and helpless “objects” of male power. But it is equally possible to conceive of women as taking a more active role: they are also actively constructing their identity, their social environment, and their interpersonal relationships. In other words, we can conceptualize gendered communication in terms of mutuality, as a *mutual construction of gender*. This does not imply, however, that we can neglect the force of societal influences, such as gender-related stereotypes. On the contrary, there are many studies which have shown that knowing the sex of an individual can influence judgments on mental and physical health, on personality traits, achievements, emotional experience, mathematical competence, or power (for an overview of sex stereotypes and performance, see Ussher 1992).

Consequently, it is necessary to consider the role of gender stereotypes in the development of attitudes to communication when examining workplace communication and interpersonal verbal interaction. In contrast to those who claim that gender is salient in all communication situations, we begin from the hypothesis that gender differences will be salient in some, but not necessarily in all situations. We adopt the interactive model of “gender-related behavior” outlined by Deaux and Major (1987) and Deaux and LaFrance (1998). The authors assume that gender has an impact only in those situations where specific factors, such as the type of task or conversational topic, are

associated with stereotypical images of women and men, and that these must be activated by certain cues. Gender salience and gender-related behavior are thus conceptualized as a function of the actor, the target, and – foremost – the situation. This interactive model relates to the concept of “doing gender” (Braun and Pasero 1997; West and Zimmerman 1987), concentrating on the *processes* through which the construction of gender and (stereo)typing takes place.

4 Gendered Communication

Since the early 1990s, researchers have investigated the relationship between gender and communication variables from a number of perspectives, such as language use (e.g. Tannen 1995; Woods 1988), competence and competence expectations (Foschi 1992), interpersonal distance (Lott 1995), leadership behavior and leadership perception (Butler and Geis 1990), and many more. Talk at work has received attention from feminists worldwide, reflecting the growing importance of professional communication for women in different countries (Fine, Johnson, Ryan, and Luftiyya 1987; Woods 1988; Holmes 1992; Rossi and Todd-Mancillas 1987; Tannen 1995; Thimm and Ehmer 1997; Thimm 1998). Communication at work has been accepted as an integral part of the study of the “gendered organization” (Kanter 1977).

The importance of *speech style* in work-related interactions has been investigated in several studies. Steffen and Eagly (1985), for example, found that high-status persons were assumed to use a more direct and less polite style, and were also thought more likely to gain compliance by using this style. Lower-status individuals were more concerned with face-saving, and also perceived the style of their partner’s talk as more direct and less polite. Softening and politeness strategies were directly related to status: the higher the status, the more direct and less polite the style of talk was perceived to be (cf. also Holmes 1995).

In this context, we outline two particularly relevant approaches (for more detail see Thimm 1995): first, the “sex-dialect hypothesis” (also called “genderlect” or “female register” hypothesis) and, second, the “sex-stereotype hypothesis.” The “genderlect” hypothesis assumes that the judgment of communication of women and men is based on actual language performance differences. Typical female language is characterized, it is suggested, by such features as tag questions, softeners, or hedges (Crosby and Nyquist 1977). In contrast, the sex-stereotype hypothesis does not assume that actual language differences are a necessary precondition for differential judgments, but rather proposes that judgments are determined by *stereotypical* expectations. Support for the sex-stereotype hypothesis can be found in Burgoon, Birk, and Hall (1991), who analyzed the category “verbal intensity” in doctor–patient communication. The authors showed that greater expression

of intensity by male speakers (indicated, for example, by the use of intensifiers such as “very,” “especially,” by directives, and by verbs of judgment) was perceived as an effective tool for reaching interactive goals, whereas women were judged as more effective when using a less intensive and more neutral style of talk.

It seems, then, that men are allowed to use an explicitly powerful style, but similar behavior by women does not elicit the same kind of approval, a case of “double standard” for men and women (Foschi 1992). Carli (1990) provides further support for this proposition. She showed that women used more “tentative” language (hedges, softeners, tag questions) and were successful in achieving their communicative goals using this strategy when talking to men, but not when talking to women. In contrast, the use of the tentative style by men was not judged as less successful. These results can be interpreted as a higher tolerance of variety in men’s communication styles than women’s, reflecting more stereotyped expectations of women’s speech style. This interpretation is further illuminated by research which showed that, regardless of gender, certain verbal cues accounted for more successful talk (Erickson, Lind, Johnson, and O’Barr 1978). The authors read out two types of texts from a defendant in a simulated jury setting. One version was formulated as “powerful,” the other as “powerless.” The powerless version was characterized by a low speech rate, less talk, more pauses as a sign of “non-dynamic delivery,” fewer interruptions and attempts to interrupt, more softeners, tag questions, intensifiers, deictic phrases, and more politeness markers. Individuals who employed powerless talk were judged as less competent and less convincing, without gender being disclosed. When asked for associations with the sex of the speakers, *women* were associated with *powerless style* whereas the typical male style was described as more powerful.

This study, as well as others (see overview in Mulac, Incontro, and James 1985), demonstrates how strongly language attitudes and judgments of discourse rely on stereotype-based categorizations of how men and women ought to behave. The results suggest that stereotypical expectations restrict women’s interactional behavior more than men’s. Whereas men are allowed a wide variety of styles, women very often are not.

5 Gendered Workplace Communication: Empirical Research

There is still relatively little research on the relationship between communication and gender, even in the organizational communication area, based on spoken discourse in natural workplace settings (cf. Poro 1999). In exploring this area, it is important at the initial stage to discover more about the communication expectations and experiences of professional women and men, and their beliefs about what constitutes effective communication.

The empirical research we have undertaken attempts to address this requirement, as well as some of the related research questions and issues mentioned above:

- 1 Research Study 1: Communication experiences and expectations of men and women in different work settings. This study examines the expectations held by women and men concerning the role and function of verbal communication in relation to workplace success and job satisfaction.
- 2 Research Study 2: Verbal strategies at work: gender differences in communication situations involving conflict and status asymmetries. This study focuses on the actual verbal strategies used by women and men in particular kinds of workplace interaction.¹

Both studies were carried out at the University of Heidelberg (Germany), and the participants were native speakers of German. The text excerpts below are translated from German in order to illustrate the kinds of verbal output produced by the participants.

5.1 Gendered expectations and professional communication experience

In the first study two female interviewers conducted two-hour interviews with 13 men and 13 women. The interview comprised a structured questionnaire and a less structured component involving open questions. The interview guidelines included questions on the following topics:

- Associations regarding communication in general
- Personal experiences concerning communication in different settings
- Communication at work
- Team communication
- Experience and expectations of successful communication
- Communication and gender

Subjects' age ranged from 26 to 52 years (mean = 38). The participants came from a variety of professional backgrounds, such as kindergarten teacher, journalist, computer consultant, and management assistant. The interviews were transcribed and the analysis focused on the following six research hypotheses. The women were expected to report:

- (1): more orientation and differentiation toward persons and situations versus contents and objects;
- (2): more socio-emotional orientation versus task orientation in terms of communication goals;
- (3): a more cooperative versus competitive style;

- (4): more consensus orientation versus influence orientation in conflict situations;
- (5): more emphasis on social competence versus professional competence in their professional self-image.

It was also expected that women as well as men would concede that

- (6): women (versus men) receive more sex discrimination, i.e. are more often named as a group (where men are seen as the “default” gender).

Table 23.1 indicates the results of the analysis of responses to the interview questions relating to these six hypotheses. Results suggest differences as well as similarities in the judgment of communicative behavior by men and women. The women from our sample reported that they perceived themselves as more relationship-oriented in their communicative goals, more cooperative in their communicative style, and more consensus-oriented in their conflict behavior. Looking at the total frequency of utterances relating to selected hypotheses in table 23.1, it can be seen that men provided an equal number of relationship-oriented and task-oriented statements, whereas women’s responses indicated a more relationship-oriented focus. The female participants also emphasized their use of a cooperative style; there is a highly significant difference between men and women in relation to the category “cooperative versus competitive style” ($p < 0.005$). Other categories indicate similarities between men and women: e.g. “person orientation” versus “object orientation” and definition of “professional competence” as the main part of their professional self-image.

Table 23.1 Results of content analysis on selected hypotheses (frequency = number of utterances; * = significant p -values)

Content	Frequency		Chi ²	p
	Women	Men		
1 Focus: person-oriented vs. content/object-oriented	95 45	104 57	0.36	0.551
2 Goals: relationship-oriented vs. task-oriented	101 47	62 62	9.35	0.002*
3 Style: cooperative vs. competitive	96 8	90 24	7.75	0.005*
4 Conflict style: consensus- vs. influence-oriented	45 11	22 18	7.12	0.007*
5 Self-image: social vs. professional competence	21 22	16 23	0.50	0.477
6 Women receive more sex discrimination	36 26	49 13	6.32	0.012*

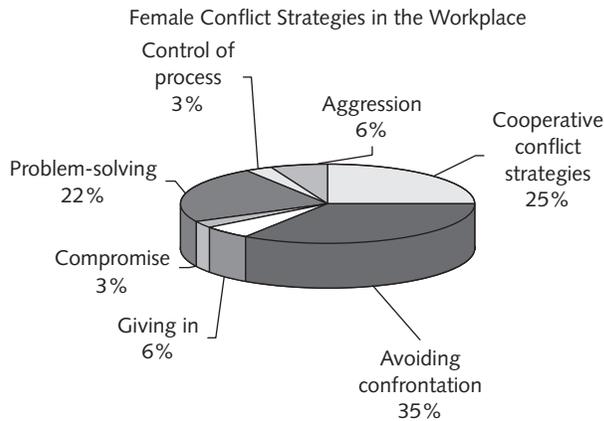


Figure 23.1 Female conflict strategies at work (n of persons = 12, n of utterances = 35)

Interestingly, both groups showed a preference in the category “professional competence” versus “social competence.” The most important characteristic for positive professional identity was “competence”: to be accepted and treated as a professionally competent individual ranked high in both groups. On the other hand, career orientation as part of “professional competence” was mentioned only by men. Another interesting result relates to the category “sex discrimination”: significantly more men reported that they saw women as being the target of sex discrimination, whereas a large number of women did not report feeling that they experienced discrimination of this kind. Apparently women are still more easily convinced of personal failure than of overall gender-related disadvantages!

Since we found the most striking differences concerning communication styles in the context of *conflict management*, we were particularly interested in examining how men and women reported dealing with conflict situations. Figure 23.1 presents the results of the analysis of female participants’ answers concerning conflict communication.

The most obvious difference concerning conflict management strategies relates to avoidance of confrontation: 35 per cent of utterances by women on how they handled conflicts could be attributed to that category: “I tend to avoid confrontation”; “I am just a terribly peace-loving person,” are examples of utterances relating to this issue. For men, on the other hand, avoiding conflicts was not a preferred strategy: they rather reported a tendency toward problem-solving and aggressive demands for compliance in dealing with conflict at work (figure 23.2).

Another striking difference is the self-perception regarding aggressive types of behavior: 32 per cent of the men’s utterances referred to aggressive behavior as a potential strategy for dealing with conflict. Some examples: “I start yelling”;

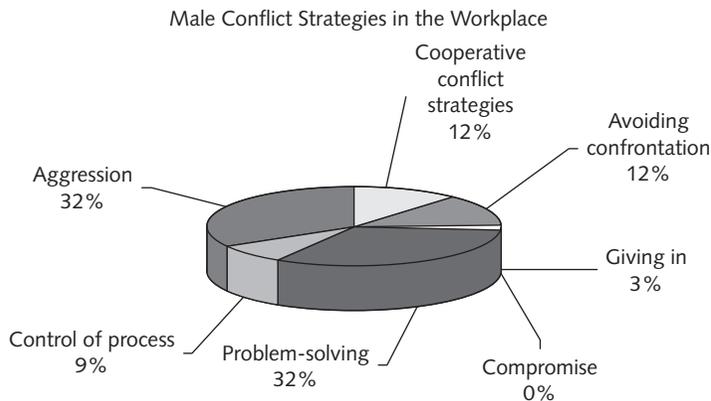


Figure 23.2 Male conflict strategies at work (n of persons = 12, n of utterances = 34)

“I can get real loud”; “I can put pressure on people”; “I can get angry and shout at someone.”

In general we concluded that participants displayed a high degree of consciousness of the fact that the workplace constitutes a gendered world. Communication in the workplace is still guided by familiar sociocultural stereotypes of men’s and women’s roles, some expressed very bluntly by the participants, as in the following comment by a male participant: “women should stay in the kitchen, and the fact that we now have a female boss is sad but true.”

Men and women in the sample regarded men as more assertive, direct, analytical, logical, aggressive, and verbose, with a higher need for self-presentation, and less flexibility than women. Women were regarded as being friendlier, more cooperative, empathic, holistic, less assertive, more indirectly aggressive, and with higher communicative competence than men. These results obviously coincide with stereotypical gender perspectives on behavior: women described themselves as non-confrontational in situations of conflict; men on the contrary saw themselves as aggressive and goal-oriented. Furthermore, we found evidence for gender-related judgments of work performance: according to our participants, women had to do better at their jobs, but at the same time be more humble and less demanding in order to be equally accepted in the workplace. In everybody’s descriptions men appeared as the “default” gender in successful or leading positions; formulations referring to women subcategorized them as, for example, “a successful woman” or “the woman in leading position.” In this respect, then, our participants conformed to the concept of double standards in their expectations of success for women and men (cf. Foschi 1992; Heilman and Guzzo 1978).

In one category, however, the professional self-image of men and women at work was surprisingly similar. For both genders the most important aspect of their professional self-image was being regarded as a *competent professional*. Perhaps this can be seen as a reflection of the ongoing German debate on

quotas for some professions, such as university professors or higher managerial positions, where women currently hold less than 10 per cent of these positions. Women want to be accepted as qualified and competent, so that they can feel equal to their male counterparts.

5.2 Gendered language use

Investigating the speech variables identified within the framework of the sex-dialect approach (see above), we examined not only the verbal strategies used by women and men in the recorded interviews, but also their verbal behavior in carefully designed role-plays. The focus of the analysis was on the style of self-presentation by male and female participants. A number of linguistic features were chosen for analysis:

- Hedges: e.g. *somewhat, somehow*
- Intensifiers: e.g. *really, very, totally, truly, clearly, extremely*
- Softeners: e.g. *maybe, probably, generally speaking, well*
- Vagueness: e.g. *could be, may, might, maybe, I think*
- Emotiva: statements which express personal involvement, e.g. *I feel like, I like, I hate*
- Use of technical terms: lexical features of business-related or office talk

All of the interviews were coded accordingly in the process of transcription. Linguistic variables were counted automatically as part of our computer-based transcription program (Neubauer, Hub, and Thimm 1994).

The results indicated that women and men differed only slightly in their linguistic self-presentation. We found some small, non-significant differences in language use by women and men on the coded parameters, especially in relation to the use of intensifiers by women. An interesting difference was found, however, in the use of technical terms, a category we described as "lexical features of business-related talk." We identified a ratio of 12 terms used by men to 50 terms used by women, providing a significant difference of $p < 0.04$. Even though the results of quantitative analyses based on counting isolated categories should be interpreted with care, this finding is suggestive in relation to the issue of impression management: the female participants seemed more inclined to demonstrate professional competence by their choice of vocabulary. Whether this is a general property of their professional style or just an accommodation to the task, to the interview situation, or to the respective interviewer, is open to interpretation.

5.3 Strategic interaction in the workplace

The second study focused on the issue of how gender and power influence strategic verbal interaction in workplace situations. This study used two

different types of role-play situations in order to compare the influence of partner information and task in relation to choice of verbal strategies. One situation can be described as potentially face-threatening, the other one as a routine task in everyday office communication. The potentially face-threatening situation is characterized by the relation between the task and the authority of the speakers. Where the authority of the speaker in a professional situation is given (as in a superior–subordinate relation), but the subordinate is not likely to comply or might even resist, we label this a “reactance prone situation” (RPS). Situations where speakers feel free to ask for something and do not expect resistance are labeled a “standard situation” (SS). To compare the effects of task, status, situation, and gender we conducted role-plays of both situational types. As a task we chose a pair of routine activities: typing up a letter and preparing coffee for the superior. The following instructions were given to the participants:

Standard situation (SS)

“You are participating in a role-play study between the head of a department of a company and her/his secretary. Please imagine you are the boss of a department in a large company, and you have your own secretary. When you are seated at your desk in a minute, call in your secretary to take a letter. Dictate her a circular letter addressing all members of staff. Point out that you want everyone to lock up their offices after work. Think up an appropriate text for this letter. When you have finished dictating, you also want your secretary to make some coffee. This is one of her duties as a secretary. *You know she will be willing to make coffee.*”

Reactance prone situation (RPS)

The instructions the participants were given were the same as above, with one modification:

“*You know that she does not like making coffee and might be unwilling to do so.*”

Altogether 109 individuals participated, all of them graduate students of the department of business administration at the University of Mannheim; 109 role-play texts were collected, 48 produced by female, 61 by male speakers. In the RPS, 26 women and 34 men took part, whereas in the SS there were 22 women and 27 men, all between 21 and 27 years of age. The part of the secretary was played by a confederate of the research team.

The communicative situation of this role-play is distinguished by the expectation of the speaker in one case that the target person (the secretary) likes making coffee and is willing to do so (standard situation), while in the other case she dislikes this task although it is one of her duties (reactance prone situation). In both situations (SS and RPS), the legitimacy of the speaker to pose the request is high, while the willingness of the partner to comply is high in one situation (SS), but low in the other (RPS).

As we were particularly looking for conflict management strategies, the reactance prone situation seemed more likely to confront the participants with

potential conflict and was therefore our main focus. Since the confederate “secretary” was asked to minimize her verbal input, the texts cannot be classified as strictly “dialogues.” However, since the participants were not informed about her status as a confederate, but rather assumed that she was also a role-play participant, we began from the hypothesis that partner orientation was a manifest property in our data.

5.4 Typology of strategic interaction

Strategic interaction can be regarded as central to reactance prone situations. If we expect resistance or unwillingness from our interaction partners, we prepare ourselves and plan our own actions in more detail. Strategy is defined as a *sequence of speech patterns serving the purpose of reaching the interactional goals of the speaker in a situation of actual or perceived reactance*. We distinguish *type of strategy* from *strategic moves*, which serve to carry out the strategy in the context of the verbal interaction. The strategy itself is named in accordance with the goal aimed for. The exact speech patterns, that is, the strategic moves, are analyzed in relation to the strategy (Thimm 1990).

To analyze strategic interaction in the context of gendered communication at work the strategies described in table 23.2, and their concomitant strategic moves, were taken as the base line. We shall focus on those outcomes which yielded significant results in terms of gender differences.

Table 23.2 Typology of strategies and strategic moves

Goals	Strategies	Strategic moves
Avoiding a conflict, preventing a conflict, securing one’s position	Face-saving strategy	Delegation, changing the topic, vagueness, mentioning external sources, softeners
Maintaining a relationship, securing the interaction	Relationship-securing strategy	Personal address, confirming, reassuring, idiomatic phrasing, metacommunication
Getting a person to cooperate	Cooperation strategy	Complimenting, praising, asking further questions, offering compensation, cooperative informing, positive assessment, self-disclosure
Establishing or confirming power over others	Power strategy	Orders, threats, mentioning status or hierarchy, demonstrating competence, direct requests

5.5 *Face-saving strategy*

As the possibility of reactance includes the risk of loss of authority for the superior, we assumed that participants would try to minimize this risk by employing face-saving strategic moves. Besides the features shown in table 23.2, a number of other linguistic categories were used to test for this strategy, including the analysis of the *syntactic form of the request*. Methodologically this comprised two steps. First, the requests for making coffee were evaluated with respect to degree of directness (direct request, question, or command, as illustrated below). Second, the whole text was analyzed for *syntactic complexity*. Depending on the context, syntactic complexity can be regarded as a partial face-saving strategy in that it demonstrates verbal competence (and thereby attends to the speaker's face needs), or it may introduce an element of vagueness by expressing the propositional content in a complex and difficult to process construction.

Both men and women used significantly more softeners in the RPS than in the SS. Analysis for gender differences yielded a clear, but unexpected, result: male participants used significantly more softeners than female. So contrary to other research, this so-called female feature functioned in these role-plays as a male strategy. Hedging on the part of the male speakers was thus employed with strategic considerations, particularly with face-saving implications. As this result contradicted other findings on powerless talk, a separate analysis for each variable in the category of "softeners" was carried out, aiming at a more detailed differentiation between various types of softeners. On the basis of German research on feminist linguistics concerning gendered language usage (Gottburgsen 2000), the following features were analyzed:

- *somehow, somewhere*
- conditional phrases (e.g. *could you, would you*)
- hedges
- politeness phrases (e.g. *please, be so kind, if you'd be so kind*)
- softening particles (e.g. *just, maybe*)
- diminutives (e.g. *little*)

Regardless of the gender of the participants, a particularly high number of softeners were found in the introductory phase of the request where the ground for positive cooperation was being laid. However, the analysis also indicated that the women handled the RPS role-play situation differently from men: the male participants employed significantly more softeners, conditional forms, and explicitly polite talk features than the women. As mentioned above, we interpret the findings in the light of strategic interaction. If a situation is seen as face-threatening with respect to personal goals and statuses, men seem entirely capable of employing features of the "powerless" talk typically associated with women's genderlect.

Another face-saving strategic move, which is used frequently, is *delegation of responsibility by referring to external authorities*. In the role-play texts, a delegation of responsibility was realized by referring to external authorities (*my boss; I've been instructed to*) or by referring to external force (*due to safety regulations; due to some complaints*). Men and women differed from one another in a highly significant way, independently of the role-play conditions, with women using many more delegating moves. Moreover, the male participants did not differentiate between the conditions, whereas female participants used forms of delegation or justification more often in the reactance prone situations. Some examples of gendered usage are:

- female participant: *this is an office regulation; I was told to . . .*
- male participant: *in the last meeting of managerial directors, we decided that . . . ; I've been told by my superior . . .*

Those males who used delegating moves, often employed a more personal and less general reference to authority, and sometimes even managed to emphasize their status as a boss, as can be seen in the first example from a male speaker above.

5.6 Relationship-securing strategy

Since the role-plays provided little or no possibility to engage in a conversation, there were only a few typical elements of the relationship-securing strategy to be found. One of these was *personal address*. A significant gender difference between the direct form of address with *Mrs. X (Frau Maier)* and *Miss X (Fräulein Maier)* was found. In German the second form of address (*Fräulein*) is hardly ever used for older women, and has a pejorative connotation. The male participants in the RPS addressed their "secretary" more often with a personal name than the participants in the SS did. Since no specific names had been given in the instruction, participants could choose freely (the proper name *Maier*, one of the most frequent German family names, was chosen by 36 participants). Another important category includes the personal pronoun *we*. By using this pronoun, participants tried to refer explicitly to a mutual perspective and demonstrate cooperation:

- *We will have to come up with something for that* (male speaker)
- *Ok, we can leave it at that for now* (female speaker)
- *All right, let's have a nice cup of coffee, don't you think so? Now that we've finished work* (female speaker)

Another relevant category for the analysis of asymmetrical communication is the use of *metacommunication*. Those phrases which communicate awareness of the underlying conflict and formulate the directive using explicit

metacommunication can also be analyzed with respect to the relationship-securing strategy. We defined metacommunication as mentioning the task (*I have a request for you*), and as mentioning the potential conflict (*I know you don't like to do that*).

Comparing conditions, results yielded a highly significant difference, with more metacommunicative utterances in the reactance prone situation. This suggests the important contribution made by metacommunicative interaction in work settings in general, since both male and female participants often used this strategic move. The more precise analysis, however, showed that women did not differentiate as much between SS and RPS as the men did.

When looking at the content of metacommunicative messages, possible resistance plays an important role. Male participants used the following phrases:

- *Well, ahm, I know you don't like doing this, but would you please make some coffee for me*
- *Ok, hm, and then I have a little request. Could you maybe make some coffee for me? I know this is not one of your favorite occupations, but that would be very nice of you.*

Whereas this type of direct, upfront addressing of the secretary was used frequently by male speakers, it was found in only three instances with female speakers, for example:

- *Ahm, Mrs. Mueller, could you make some coffee for me nonetheless anyway?*
- *Ahm, I'd like some coffee, would you be willing to make some coffee for me, you can make some for yourself, too.*

Just like the men's, the women's messages included reference to the underlying conflict, but they also often offered compensation. Offering compensation, such as promising personal activities in the future, sometimes takes on a ritual character, especially in institutional talk. The following excerpt shows that some of the female participants even went out of their way to offer compensation:

- *Ahm, Mrs. Maier, would you please make some coffee for me; I know that you don't really like doing that, but tomorrow I'll do it again myself, ok?*

This formulation takes on the character of an apology for the demand. If we see the task of coffee-making as part of a symbol of status asymmetry this seems to be a very "un-bossy" thing to offer!

5.7 Cooperation strategy

Cooperative management depends to a great extent on the way a superior shares information with his/her subordinates. Our first study indicated that

women perceived themselves as very cooperative and less aggressive than men. The second study was designed to compare male and female degrees of cooperativeness when asking someone to undertake a task which they might be unwilling to do. A request such as this could involve a degree of face-threat or risk to one's own authority; this seemed an appropriate situation to test whether women would actually behave in the way they perceived themselves.

The participants in the role-play dealt with the problem presented by the task in different ways. Sometimes the explanations the participants gave to their secretary concerning the circular letter were lengthy and detailed. These explanatory introductions were counted as a move of *cooperative informing*. When looking at gender differences, we found that male participants typically formulated this informational part in more detail than the women. One example:

- *Good morning Mrs. Maier. Please come in and have a seat, please. I'd like you to take dictation. This is to be a circular letter to our colleagues, which includes some important information . . .*

The speech act of informing someone about something is usually performed by a person in a higher position and has to be seen in the context of the hierarchical structure of the relationship. Analyzing the cooperative informing moves, it became obvious that the male participants regarded this type of communication with their secretary as an important aspect of their role. They took time to explain the circumstances of the task in nearly every role-play of the RPS.

The *positive assessment of the work* of the secretary is another strategic move in the cooperative strategy. Both men and women seemed concerned about this issue, but differed in the positive assessment with respect to some details. Women thanked their secretary much more often after they finished taking notes for the letter (*Ok, that's about it, thank you*). Men tended to comment more generally on the secretary's skills or qualifications (*I know you can do this, just finish it up as usual*).

One move that differed between women and men in the context of strategic cooperation was *self-disclosure moves*, that is, the voluntary passing on of rather intimate information by the participants. Self-disclosure is recognized as an important and well-researched phenomenon in interpersonal interaction (e.g. Pearce and Sharp 1973). The role-plays provided examples of personal messages used in the RPS to reduce the level of face-threat in the situation. Indicators of such self-disclosure phrases were personal pronouns such as *we* which suggest mutuality, speech acts such as asking further questions, indicating implicit support for the secretary, or requesting advice from her (*And now? Sincerely? Can we leave it that way?*). The most obvious way to formulate self-disclosures are phrases such as: *I'm so overworked*, or personal requests to the secretary such as: *Now that we've finished our work we can have a nice cup of coffee, don't you think so?*

The data showed highly significant differences in self-disclosure between male and female participants. The differences were qualitative as well as quantitative in nature and became obvious within the structure of arguments. If female participants employed self-disclosure it often took on the character of an excuse:

- *And then I want to ask you a big favor: I've just too much to do and feel really burdened, could you please make some coffee for me?*
- *Then I would like to ask you to make some coffee for me, I have such a headache. Thank you.*

For some male participants, on the other hand, self-disclosure was employed to demonstrate importance:

- *Well, so much for this, and now for the other thing, ahm, I would ask you to, by way of exception, I do know that you don't like to do it, but today I still have so much work to do, so today I have to stay in late, and I want to ask you to make some coffee for me.*

Here the women mention stress and headaches, while the male speaker underlines the necessity of working overtime. Describing yourself as *burdened* does not refer to competence, but rather conveys the impression of not being able to cope. And having a headache comes across as a classical stereotype of female incapability.

5.8 *Power strategy*

Many interactional situations in the workplace are heavily influenced by differences of position in the hierarchy and status differences. Not surprisingly, linguistic features also strongly reflect the influence of status and hierarchy.

One indicator of dominance in interactions and of powerful talk is the type of speech act used. On the assumption that syntactic phrasing and speech act type indicate different power strategies, the texts were analyzed for different types of request formulations: direct request, indirect requests, and commands. Orders or commands included utterances such as: *And then make some coffee for me*; indirect requests involved sentences such as: *Coffee would be nice now, wouldn't it?* Other ways of asking for coffee were coded as direct requests: *All right, and now you could make some coffee for me, please*. The results of analyzing all the available texts in this way are recorded in table 23.3.

In the potentially face-threatening situation (RPS), women used significantly more indirect requests than any other strategy, and they completely avoided orders or commands. Indirect requests are generally regarded as one means of expressing politeness (Holmes 1995). Men, on the other hand, showed a greater preference than women for direct requests in both conditions. Looking at this

Table 23.3 Types and frequency of requests

	Women (n = 48)		Men (n = 61)	
	SS (22)	RPS (26)	SS (27)	RPS (34)
Direct requests	6	11	9	18
Indirect requests	13	21	19	18
Orders/commands	3	0	4	2
Total	22	32	32	38

result from the perspective of powerful talk, it appears that gender stereotypes are being confirmed: men are more direct in phrasing their requests, and some even employ canonical power-oriented strategies such as commands, whereas women are typically more polite and less direct.

Acting the “boss” is realized even more explicitly in some texts. One of the most striking and explicit features is the use of the title or position of the speaker, a strategy used only by male speakers. When finishing up the dictation they often added a title or a position, referring to themselves as *the head of the department*, *the management* or *sincerely – Your board of directors*. These titles refer to official positions and therefore emphasize their superior position.

Another category which yielded highly significant differences between men and women was the type of technical language used, that is, business-related talk or “office talk.” Office talk is characterized by lexical features, particularly nouns, and by certain phrases used in business settings (e.g. *mail it out*; *distribute the copies*; *xerox the letter*, etc.) and by specific routines. The category “office talk” not only reflects a higher identification with the job (or rather the role-play situation), it is also very much part of powerful talk at work. Using the right “code” signals competence. This code consists mainly of the technical terminology relevant to the situation. Male participants used such terminology significantly more frequently than the female participants did.

6 Summary and Conclusions

The results from the studies described in this chapter suggest that similarities and differences in gendered communication in the workplace should be considered from a range of perspectives. First, it is clear that for both men and women verbal communication plays an important role in interpersonal interaction at work. Second, our interview study showed that, for both men and women, conveying professional competence was the most important goal for their work-related self-image. Furthermore, men and women in the interview

study claimed to use different cooperative and conflict strategies at work, a self-assessment whose accuracy was confirmed by the role-play study.

Third, the data from the role-play study suggested that, overall, male participants used a wider variety of communicative strategies than women. Male participants used features of a “powerless style” and related strategies in order to pursue their interactional goals more frequently than female participants did. Female participants, on the other hand, did not rely as much on verbal references to status or personal position; their approach tended to be brief and highly structured. Our data showed that elements of the “female register” or “powerless register” are equally accessible to men and women and must be regarded as highly context-dependent. The strategic use of elements of powerless talk may in some circumstances be an advantage to all interlocutors. However, professional men and women are frequently measured by different standards (Foschi 1992); hence women are often sanctioned into less flexible ways of behaving, while a greater range of acceptable behaviors is available to men (Carli 1990).

In line with the view that gender differences are salient only in some situations, as suggested by the “gender-in-context model” (Deaux and Major 1987; Deaux and LaFrance 1998), one needs to identify precisely those contexts where gender has an impact. Factors such as task or conversational topic are often associated with sex-stereotypical images, and these may be activated by particular cues, as in the different role-play situations devised for our second study, especially where the female secretary was asked to prepare coffee. In many cases it is the small details, the tone of voice or the wording, which makes gender and verbal gender differences salient. Notwithstanding that there are social and political barriers and disadvantages for women which have to be taken into account, we believe it to be of decisive importance to look at *female activities* from the perspective of the mutual construction of reality. This suggests a gender-construction perspective – which we believe is a perspective of change and chance, adequately taking into account the complexity of gendered interaction.

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