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CONSTRUCTING AND MAINTAINING WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH TALK

Stanca MĂDA[1]

Abstract: *Workplace interaction is a site for achieving objectives: both the transactional objectives, embedded in the organizational targets, and the relational objectives i.e. linked to the concepts of power and politeness. This paper focuses mainly on the communication strategies used by the chairs of two meetings, which took place in Romanian organizations. The direct and indirect manifestations of power aim at controlling the development of the meetings and at building and maintaining hierarchical relationships. Positive politeness strategies foster collegiality and strengthen workplace relationships.*

Key words: *Workplace interaction, transactional objectives, relational objectives*, *power, positive politeness strategy.*

1. Introduction

In many workplaces, meetings cover a significant period of working time, representing the main forum for information, planning and organizing the activity. It functions "as one of the most important and visible sites of organizational power, and of the reification of organizational hierarchy' (Mumby 1988: 68). Decisions are reached and people cooperate for solving problems. Meetings represent a dynamic communicative process, in which participants focus on both transactional and relational objectives of the organization. This paper focuses on the "relational work" (Fletcher 1999) that people do in order to construct and maintain good working relationships during meetings. Participants use various communicative strategies for building power hierarchy and maintaining discussions in the limits of politeness.

2. Power and Politeness: the Role of the Chair

Generally speaking, seniority and authority are the main factors in meeting management. The role of the chair has specific discursive functions and determines the content and style of meetings, their general structure and the direction taken in the discussion. Explicit manifestations of power are overt strategies of meeting management. They include *setting the agenda, maintaining discussions within the track (the topic), marking each stage of the meeting, summarizing progress and reaching decisions.*

One of the most obvious way in which someone can influence the content of a meeting is by determining what goes on the agenda. Managers set the agenda and make explicit at the beginning of the meeting what they expect to cover and in what order.

[1]Romanian Language and Literature Department, Faculty of Letters, *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

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Example 1[1] (Context: The beginning of a board meeting in which Ina (the general manager) states the agenda):

(**RO**)

INA: Deci pe ordinea de zi, azi avem discutarea rezultatelor din 2005… cu diversele influenţe pe care le-au avut anumiţi parametrii pe care nu i-am… stabilit… nu i-am avut în vedere la bugetare… Vom trece în revistă obiectivele pe care ni le-am asumat în 2005, cele generale ale companiei…şi...ăă..vom discuta apoi ce obiective ne asumăm în 2006…urmând ca să trecem la discuţii individuale pe obiective, cu fiecare în parte, după ce stabilim obiectivele companiei…

(**EN**)

INA: So, today on the agenda we have discussing the results from 2005…with the influences of various parameters we didn't… establish… didn't consider at budgeting… We'll go through the objectives we assumed in 2005, the general ones of the company…and…we'll be discussing what objectives we are assuming in 2006…then we'll go on with individual discussions, with each of you, focusing on objectives, after we establish the objectives of the company…

Setting the agenda is a strategy that occurs in meetings irrespective of size, being signalled through statements such as: *We shall talk about…; What I'd like to do is…; So, what I propose to discuss in this meeting…; We will analyze…; we will focus upon... and we will discuss about…; Let's roll through the main issues from the agenda.* These utterances indicate that the speaker is organizing the discourse according to the aimed objectives.

Explicitly stating the agenda represents an efficient means through which the chair controls the discourse and affirms the authority. A useful strategy of resisting authority or subverting the established power structures is attempting to set an alternative agenda. We can observe this when a participant, other than the chair, proposes a different agenda or diverts the discussion for a considerable time.

Example 2 (Context: A board meeting. Ina (the general manager) proposes to move forward to another subject. Eni, Matei, and Carol are department managers. Irina works in administration.):

(**RO**)

1 INA: aşa… şi dacă tot suntem la tipărituri… Ai văzut că nu a fost greu… asta a fost tot despre espresso.
2 ENI: mai sunt…
3 INA: a, mai sunt…
4 IRINA: cel mai important mi se pare că e folosirea siglei de
5 CAROL: a…
6 IRINA: către terţi
7 INA: insurance documents…
8 IRINA: acolo.
9 INA: aicea la insurance mă uit eu… asta merge la tehnic…
10 IRINA: se ocupă cineva?
11 MATEI: da (…)
12 INA: certificatele de calitate
13 MATEI: tot la tehnic.
14 IRINA: tot la tehnic?
15 INA: da…şi după ce sunt puse la punct să le dăm la logistică şi să le trimită odată cu produsele…
16 CAROL: nu ar putea fi făcută o chestie…în funcţie de ce sort avem noi atunci, în momentul în care tipăreşte factura să iasă şi un certificat de calitate…să-şi ia numărul de lot…şi aşa mai departe.
17 INA: deci…
18 CAROL: introdus în baza de date.
19 INA: mentorul este în comă…
20 CAROL: mentorul este în comă de?
21 INA: timp, pierdem foarte mult timp…

(**EN**)

1 INA: so…and if we're talking about prints… you saw it wasn't so difficult… this was all about Expresso.
2 ENI: There are more…
3 INA: oh, there are…
4 IRINA: the most important (fact) seems to be the usage of the sigle by…
5 CAROL: oh…
6 IRINA: third parties

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7 INA: insurance documents…
8 IRINA: there.
9 INA: here at insurance I'll check … this goes to technical…
10 IRINA: is anybody in charge?
11 MATEI: yes (…)
12 INA: quality certificates
13 MATEI: technical, too.
14 IRINA: technical?
15 INA: yes…and after they are brushed up we pass them to logistics to send them with the products
16 CAROL: couldn't it be done something like…depending on what sort we are on, when it prints the invoice, to select a quality certificate…to be able to take the batch number…and so on.
17 INA: so…
18 CAROL: Put it into the database
19 INA: the mentor is in coma…
20 CAROL: the mentor is in coma of?
21 INA: time, we lose a lot of time…

In the above example we have two subversive moves, one assumed by Irina, and other by Carol. The authority of the chair (Ina) in setting the agenda is questioned by Irina who diverts the discussion (lines 4, 6, and 8). In line 9, Ina assumes solving the problem and attempts to move on. In line 10, Irina initiates and successfully completes assigning the responsibly before Ina does. Ina brings *quality certificates* into discussion (line 12), Matei offers a solution (line 13), Irina asks for confirmation (line 14) and Ina ratifies the decision and sets the course of action through a directive (line 15) The second subversive move is Carol's attempt to propose a different technical solution (lines 16 and 18), which is abruptly rejected by Ina (line 19). She chooses a disconcerting expression (line 19) in order to bring discussions on track, explaining the reason for her decision (line 21

The chair's role is to take responsibility for ensuring the agenda is fully covered in the time available. Keeping the discussion on track involves moving a group back to the agenda topic during or after a digression. This chair uses topic control strategies typically signaled by a discourse marker such: *da* (right), *sigur* (sure), *bine* (okay), *deci* (so), or even more explicitly: *let's get back to the point / back on track.*

A related strategy is the use of crisp, businesslike statements and responses to contribution of others. These are meant to interrupt the discourse strategically, in order to move the discussion along or to deal with a particular issue briskly. This strategy signals the speaker's wish to solve the problems efficiently, avoiding any unnecessary digression.

Example 3 (Context: A board meeting. Ina, the general manager, attempts to move the discussion forward, preventing Matei's digression.):
(**RO**)
1 MATEI: părerea mea…
2 INA: da.
3 MATEI: este că facem un talmeş-balmeş din toate…ne trebuie cineva să răspundă… să ne facă toate traducerile, adaptările, de fapt…
4 INA: deci anumite documente da, altele nu.
5 MATEI: să le aducem în discuție pe fiecare în parte…să le citim apoi să…
6 INA: sigur, le parcurgem şi apoi am putea să le împărțim ca şi sarcini…
(**EN**)
1 MATEI: in my opinion…
2 INA: yes
3 MATEI: is that we do a mambo-jumbo out of these… we need somebody to take responsibility… to do all the translations for us, adapting, in fact…
4 INA: certain documents yes, others no.
5 MATEI: we should discuss each of them… to read them, then to…
6 INA: sure, we'll go through and then distribute them as tasks…

Ina's contributions (lines 2, 4, 6) are pithy and focused and serve to minimize discussion and keep exploration of the problems they face to a minimum. The group knows each other well and the attention to politeness factors is minimal.

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Another related strategy involves keeping the discussion on track by ensuring people thoroughly cover a topic before moving on, thus making sure they do not digress.

Example 4 (Context: A board meeting. Ina gives a summary of the situation.):
(**RO**)
INA: din punctul meu de vedere… ceea ce aveam de discutat în plen am acoperit… dacă voi mai aveți ceva de comentat… vă rog să comentați.
(**EN**)
INA: as I see it… what we had to discuss in plenary meeting, we've covered…if you have anything else to say… please do.

The role of the chair is very important in introducing every topic of the meeting, summarizing progress and reaching decisions.

Example 5 (Context: Board meeting. Ina surveys the budget statement for the last year with the department managers.):
(**RO**)
INA: şi…dacă nu aveți nimic împotrivă o să încep…să vă prezint (…) hai să deschidem (…) prima dată şi ne concentrăm pe această coloană… şi pe aceasta… da? (…) acum ajungem la B… deci am comparat 2004 cu 2005. Hai să vedem, mai ştim să bugetăm? (…) şi hai să ne uităm şi la (…) şi acum hai să vă arăt cum ne-a influențat (…)
INA: deci asta e bifată, da?
(**EN**)
INA: and…if you don't mind, I will start…presenting (..) let's open (…) first and focus on this column…and on this one…okay? (…) now we go to B… so we've compared 2004 with 2005. Let's see, do we know how to make the budget? (…) and let's look over (…) let me show you how we were influenced (…)
INA: so, this one is checked, okay?

The first part of the meeting is dedicated to budget analysis. Ina is marking every step of this analysis using visual aids. In order to prevent any misunderstandings, she mentions even the position of the figures on the handout.

Sometimes, summarizing progress is made overtly only before and after a break. In general, this strategy is functioning only backwards, summarizing what has been discussed so far. In the following example, we have a forward orientation of this strategy.

Example 6 (Context: The end of the first part of a board meeting. Ina is reconsidering the agenda according to what has left to be discussed.):
(**RO**)
1 INA: (…) deci ăăă dacă vreți facem o pauză după care revenim să discutăm punct cu punct subiectele din expresso şi cine răspunde de implementare şi să dăm termene… pentru că termenele erau 31 decembrie 2005. Facem pauză?
2 MATEI: facem.
3 INA: dacă vreți… dacă nu… continuăm (…)
4 INA: La fix ne vedem. Da? (…)
5 INA: reluăm… deci foarte multe în plen nu mai avem, decât despre expresso…
(**EN**)
1 INA: (…) sooo…if you want, we can have a break and then discuss item after item the topics from expresso and who is responsible for implementing them, we set deadlines…because the old ones were 31st of December 2005. Shall we have a break?
2 MATEI: Let's have it
3 INA: if you want…if not…we'll go on (…)
4 INA: See you at sharp. Ok? (…)
5 INA: Let's see…so we don't have much in plenum, only about expresso…

Ina is not only summarizing progress, but also reminding the participants what has left from the initial agenda. She draws attention to deadlines, prioritizing subjects and does a preview of the second part of the meeting. Her attitude is a powerful one, asserting disponibility of continuing the meeting without a break.

Reaching decisions represents an important function in the meeting management. Below we provide some

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brief illustration of how decisions are arrived at and ratified. The most overt and simple strategy for managing the decision-making process is to simply state the desired decision, especially when dealing with routine and uncontentious issues.

Example 7 (Context: Board meeting. Ina arrives at and ratifies the decision *on record*.):
(**RO**)
1 INA: condițiile generale de vânzare le-am discutat, aşa…şi cu disclaimers… care trebuie să apară pe scrisori, pe mailuri şi pe aşa mai departe…de astea se ocupă Irina în aşa fel încât să avem formularistica la zi şi să nu mai vină mail-uri fără…
2 IRINA: da, aia e uşor.
(**EN**)
1 INA: We've already discuss the general selling conditions, so… and about disclaimers… that have to appear on letters, mails and so forth… these will be handled by Irina so that we shall have the forms up-to-date and there won't be any mails without…
2 IRINA: Yes, that's easy.

Example 8 (Context: Same meeting, later):
(RO) 1 INA: deci sunt nişte texte care trebuie să apară obligatoriu pe orice prospect şi având în vedere în continuare că de prelucrarea prospectului ăstuia se ocupă…da? sau dai la altcineva?
2 CAROL: (dă din cap aprobator)
3 INA: atunci Carol are grijă ca… Carol are grijă ca aceste disclaimers traduse… să apară pe toate documentele tipărite…
(EN)
1 INA: So there are some texts that have to appear on every prospect and considering that the further perfection of the prospect is taken care of…yes? Or you give it to somebody else
2 CAROL: (nodding)
3 INA: then Carol is taking care of… Carol is seeing that these translated disclaimers… appear on all printed documents…

Ina modulates the legitimate use of power according to the interlocutor. She treats Irina (her assistant) overtly, without asking for her consent before ratifying the decision (example 7). Carol's superior status (manager) determines Ina to adjust her strategy. She is waiting for Carol's consent (even a silent one) before ratifying the decision (example 8). A collaborative decision is reached at the end of such discussions and the negotiation strategies involved in the process may be very complex. The chair is often responsible for the downstream consequences of a decision and, no matter who else proposes a solution, the manager should ratify it, and, consequently, assume responsibility. After reaching a decision, the managerial mechanism moves forward to a new topic, which is presented, analyzed or negotiated, and closed under the form of a ratified decision. Analysis of our data clearly indicates that attending to the face needs of others and nurturing good workplace relationships also play an important part in processes like decision-making. Holmes (2003: 77) demonstrates that "participants in a workplace where authority relationships and relative statuses are emphasized and regarded as paramount will more readily accept a unilateral decision on a contentious issue, while workplaces with a more egalitarian work ethic and an emphasis on participation will be more likely to engage in negotiation in such circumstances". A possible solution is using humour, as a means of attenuating the face threat (Brown and Levinson 1978) of a veto, a contestive or disagreeing statement or a difficult decision.

Example 9 (Context: Board meeting which took place on January 13th, 2006. The manager (Ina) emphasizes the idea of an outdated deadline that needs postponing.):
(**RO**)
1 IRINA: cât de repede trebuie introduse?
2 INA: 31 decembrie
3 CAROL: a, da?
4 INA: da
5 IRINA: 31 decembrie care?
6 INA: 2005

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7 CAROL: noroc că nu am apucat…(…)
8 IRINA: atunci când?
9 CAROL: la sfârşitul anului trebuia să fie gata
10 INA: e depăşit…la sfârşitul lui februarie
11 IRINA: sfârşitul lui februarie
12 CAROL: 29
13 INA: anul ăsta nu are 29
14 CAROL: 31 da? 31.

(**EN**)

1 IRINA: When do they have to be implemented?
2 INA: December 31st.
3 CAROL: Oh, really?
4 INA: Yes.
5 IRINA: Which December 31st?
6 INA: 2005
7 CAROL: Lucky we didn't get to…(…)
8 IRINA: When then?
9 CAROL: It should have been ready by the end of the year.
10 INA: it's outdated…the end of February
11 IRINA: the end of February
12 CAROL: 29th
13 INA: This year doesn't have 29th
14 CAROL: 31st, yeah? 31st.

Humour is a useful strategy of resisting Ina's authority. On the one hand, Carol realizes the impact this decision will have on his working program and tries to postpone the new deadline to a later date. On the other hand, Ina is forced to impose a closer, but manageable deadline. The conversational joke raised by this situation resides in the placement of the deadline in the calendar. Without realizing it, Carol proposes an inexisting date. When Ina contests it, Carol comes with an even more unrealistic date, February 31st.

The chair of the meeting adopts a facilitative role, which can be seen as a manifestation of deference or politeness, or perhaps as a collegial gesture to assist a team to resolve a problem or decide on a course of action. Very often the chair asks for people opinion, agreement and understanding, using expressions like: *De acord?* (Agree?) *Uitați-vă!* (Look at that!) *Ce credeți?* (What do you think?) *Dacă nu înțelegeți vă rog să mă întrerupeți, da?* (If you don't understand, please interrupt me, ok?) etc. The chair decreases the authoritative dimension of his / her role (the power) and emphasizes politeness strategies, in order to maintain good working relationships and, consequently, to successfully implement the decisions resulted from the meeting.

It is important to recognize that management strategies may be very subtle and sophisticated as well as overt and explicit. Summarizing the discussion, for instance, gives the summarizer a good deal of influence over what is overtly recognized as having been agreed, or what is noted as important, as opposed to what is quietly dropped. While the manager and the chair are the most obviously influential roles in relation to meeting management, others also make contributions that may be important in some contexts. A recognized "expert", on a particular topic, may have considerable influence in the discussion related to his / her area of expertise. Contributions from less powerful meeting participants may be re-evaluated and later developed by more statusful and authoritative participants.

In egalitarian cultures, workplace is the site for daily interaction and negotiation. Workplace communicative patterns are described as total commitment of participants, excellent skills of adaptation to context and constant need for face-to-face interaction. The boundary between personal and professional is more opaque and social talk may interfere even in workplace meetings.

Sensitivity to the distinctive workplace culture in which a manager operates is evident in the attention paid to interpersonal and relational factors, group dynamics and the face needs of other participants. This concern is reflected in politeness strategies as: avoiding to impose a solution and encouraging free discussions over a contentious topic, as well as clear and repeated marking the difficulties and negotiating agreement before making the final decision.

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Example 10 (Context: A department meeting between the manager of the department and the area managers. The chair is analysing the sales figures and the course of action required for some of the dealers.):

(**RO**)

CARMEN: deci avem o sută de dealeri care nu vând deloc (…) fiecare va face o analiză pe zona lui şi nu numai o analiză, vor face şi un raport (…) Da? Deci analiza dealerilor care nu vând, dar au standuri…se va prezenta raport de către fiecare director în parte şi aici să analizăm îi mai ţinem la anul…nu îi mai ţinem, ne scoatem standul…avem stand pentru că e într-o zonă bună şi atunci sigur…îl lăsăm…îl mai ţinem…dar aici fiecare…o să vedeţi fiecare ce trebuie să facem şi ce nu…da? (…) Dacă doriţi aici să discutăm ceva? Analizaţi fiecare pe zona voastră…da? Şi la următoarea întâlnire o să vedem ce facem aici unde avem standuri…să vedem care e soluţia…le desfiinţăm sau nu.

(**EN**)

CARMEN: so we have a hundred dealers that don't sell at all (…) each of you will have an analysis on your area and not only an analysis, but also a report (...) ok? So the analysis of the dealers that don't have sales, but have presentation stands…each of the managers will have a report done and then we should analyze…shall we keep them next year…or not, we take the stand out… we have the stand because it is in a good area and then sure…we'll leave it…we'll keep it…but here again…each of you…you'll see what we have to do and what we don't…ok? (…) If you would like here to discuss anything? Each of you…analyze on your area…ok? And next time we discuss what we do here…where we have stands…to find a solution…keep them or not.

Carmen's management style (especially her consultative strategies for assisting the meeting to reach a satisfactory decision) contrasts markedly in this respect with that of Ina. However, there is extensive evidence that Carmen is also a capable and authoritative manager, who controls the discussion and ensures decisions are reached. In addition to more overt strategies, such as complimenting participants on their work and their professional attitudes (*He is very efficient… in fact he is the only one who managed to reach the top… the bonus top…*) Carmen uses humour, especially self-deprecating humour, to ease tension in meetings (*I should check the job description… Fetch the job description of the sales department manager*). She is systematically addressing to each area manager, stimulating their participation in the meeting. She encourages them to ask questions and to offer details. Good listening skills are very important for managers. They are marked in conversation by verbal and non-verbal contributions such as: nodding, asking open questions, using short expressions of approval etc.

3. Conclusions

We have identified and exemplified situations of overt or subtle manifestations of power in workplace talk. The role of chair in a meeting is instantiated through control strategies especially at discourse level: setting the agenda, maintaining discussions within the track (the topic), marking each stage of the meeting, summarizing progress and reaching decisions. Several positive politeness strategies (paying compliments, using self-deprecating humour, expressing appreciation, interest and concern to the face needs of other participants) were meant to stress the importance of creating and maintaining good workplace relationships. What results can be rendered as such: politeness is the mirrored image or the other coin-side of power. One without the other is worthless, but together they create an efficient communicative symbiosis.

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[1] The examples in this paper were collected by the author as part of the research for her PhD paper and they are to be published in a corpus of workplace interactions at Transylvania University Publishing House in 2009, as part of a larger on-going research project entitled „*Professional Language in Present-day Romanian. Linguistic Patterns and Discoursive Structures* and is supported by a governmental grant (CNCSIS, ID 142). The examples are structured in three parts: the context, the original Romanian version (RO) and the translated version (EN).

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