
HEDGING AND POWER DYNAMICS IN FEMALE-LED BUSINESS MEETINGS: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how hedging could be applied during business meetings that involve females, and how they have a union with power dynamics. Though language and leadership styles have been explored extensively, there has not been much research on the exact role of hedging in the establishing of power relations in the female-led meetings. Hedging is considered to be some linguistic mechanism, used to decrease or tone down statements, and it is usually perceived as an indicator of uncertainty or powerlessness of exclamation. In a female-dominated business environment, however, hedging can perform as a power-negotiation strategy, collaboration strategy, or gendered expectation management strategy. This paper presents a qualitative analysis of discourse recorded among business meetings led by women so as to understand how hedged language is used in female-led environments and how it relates to power among women in the business setting. The results make it likely that hedging is not only an indicator of weak Authority but also a method to overcome interpersonal relationships, shape decisions within a group, and command decision. This study adds to the general knowledge of how subtly language can create power and authority in female dominated businesses. The study has pointed to the significance of the incorporation of gendered communication strategies and their bearing on the effectiveness of any type of organization.

Keyword: Hedging, Power Dynamics, Female Leadership, Discourse Analysis, Gendered Communication, Business Meetings

INTRODUCTION

Within the last couple of years, significant research has been undertaken on the relationship between gender, language, and power in professional practice with grave emphasis on how language has been used in leadership practices. The aspect of gendered communication practice, especially on the business context, continues to be a topic of interest, particularly to issues of language use to circumscribe power imbued behaviors. Another notable feature in this is the aspect of hedging meaning strategies employed to reduce the strength of a statement like using words like maybe, perhaps or I think (Lakoff, 1973). Hedging has traditionally been seen as polite or uncertain and many people say that hedging is a characteristic of females more than of males as being hesitant or uncertain talkers. Holmes (1995) points out that hedging may be an element of an expression of lack of authority or may serve as an effort to diminish the possible power of an utterance. Nevertheless, this opinion has already been refuted by new research which indicates that hedging may be used in many different ways and not necessarily to express uncertainty.

The latest research shows that the issue of hedging may have a certain strategy in the context of the leader communication and most prominently under the circumstance where interpersonal rapport and cooperation are valued (Barker, 2002). Within the framework of female leadership, the tendency of hedging may not be viewed as a demonstration of weakness and indecisiveness. Rather, it can be used as a device to organize group, to develop inclusive decision-making environments and to develop a more collaborative environment. This is especially important in business environment where leaders would prefer to be assertive yet empathetic and all inclusive (Clifton & Leach, 2004). In these situations,

hedging may enable the leaders to appear authoritative but, at the same time, also open and flexible.

The issue of language in leadership, specifically the language of women leaders also became a topic of interest in the linguistic and management research community. Although the study of gender and language in leadership has been largely concentrated on male leadership, where assertive and direct communication supposedly applies, such studies have shifted towards the use of language by women in leadership positions. Women leaders might also experience a problematic situation in dealing with power relationships because the norms of femininity tend to promote more relational, accommodative, and cooperative behavior in women (Eagly & Carli, 2003). Consequently, women leaders might resort to communicating in particular ways to fulfill such expectations without distorting their power in the employment community (Cameron, 2007).

This study examines the issue of the intricate association between hedging and power patterns in female headed business meetings. Particularly, the study will understand the ways in which the female leaders deploy the hedging to maintain control, bargain power, and implement cooperation in business meetings. A research problem is rooted in the fact that the subtle forms of influence that the specific linguistic form, hedging, may have on the success of the leadership within business organizations conducted by women may have to be recognized. Although much has been laid down regarding the use of hedging in general communication and how it is gender-related, less has been studied about how hedging applies in the particular situation of female leadership in business settings (Cameron & Baxter, 2005).

The work is noteworthy due to a fact that it is in the current process of developing discussions on the topic of gendered communication strategies, particularly in leadership situations. The aim of the research is to illuminate the role female leaders play within power structures and organizational dynamics through the use of language, by discussing the use of hedging in female-on-female business meetings. Moreover, it provides an insight into how hedging can be more than an indication of uncertainty or politeness as it is assumed, but a tactical action that can be exploited to assert authority as well as facilitate a consensus and trade power (Ford & Holmes, 2002).

This study will focus on the usage of hedging tactics by female leaders at the business meetings and the role of such tactics in directing power within the meeting particularly in relation to their leader positions. The study will cognize the different hedging patterns used by examining the discourse during business meetings facilitated by women and how such patterns affect the decisions making process, group dynamics and general leadership performance. The paper will seek to confront conventional terminologies surrounding the notion of hedging as being passive or a tentative language aspect and understand how it could serve as an instrument of pragmatism where a woman can express authority and be collaborative.

The study is especially significant as it has been observed that women have been more visible in leadership roles in different sectors and industries and that more sophisticated examinations relating to how gendered language is applied to defining organizational power dynamics are necessary. With the dynamic changes in the corporate world, the study of communication of the female leaders could be a window to understand the effectiveness of leadership and the organizational culture pertaining to the gender aspect in organization. Through the analysis of the application of hedging, the study adds to the already elaborate literature describing the language strategies used by the female leaders to maintain balance in power and increase their level of leadership and influence in a business meeting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hedging is a widely studied linguistic concept that has quite an extensive background and history with the initial pioneering works being done by researchers such as Lakoff (1973) and Holmes (1995) who gave birth to the concept of hedging as a linguistic technique. Hedging is the mechanism that employs phrases, words or structures that serve to make the statements less directly voiced or more tentative or uncertain. Among the familiar hedging devices, one may distinguish modal verbs (could, might), adverbs (esp., perhaps, maybe) and vague constructions (esp., I think, sort of) (Lakoff, 1973). Conventional ways of looking at hedging has seen it as an instrument of acting on the consequences of statements often in line with what can be expected of, politeness and indirectness in communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson (1987) developed a revolutionary theory of politeness based on the premise that talkers hedge as a way of making less demanding of another person, or weakening an assertion.

These notions were further extended to that of gendered communication where scholars such as Holmes (1995) and Coates (1993) posit that women are found more in the use of hedging language as compared to men in the early literature on gender and language. This, in their argument, relates to the societal norms and expectations of femininity which implies politeness and deference and an inclination to cooperative rather than confrontational communication. The hypothesis that women are more hedging has become widely used in the study, and the initial project explained such a phenomenon as absence of authority or the necessity of women to perform the stereotypical gender-related tasks of nurture and passiveness. Indeed, Coates (1993) claimed that hedging was indeed one of the overall trends in communication strategies that women adopted as a way of avoiding a direct confrontation and achieving social harmony. Such results strengthened the stereotype that women unlike men speak in more indirect language expressions and are less assertive in their words.

More recent literature has however challenged this naive belief that female use of hedging can only be seen as an expression of capturing uncertainty or inability to take control. It is also in these works that the claim that hedging suggests weakness or insecurity permanently, is refuted. Alternatively, they offer a possible strategic result of hedging, which is the ability of a speaker who is also a female leader to control the complicated situations regarding the social environment in given circumstances, e.g., business meetings. Goddard and Patterson (2000) also pointed out that one can use hedging to generate strategic ambiguity, which can then be used to negotiate power relationships as well as to keep the relationship in rapport. In the same manner, Burr (2013) has emphasized that the hedging concept is not necessarily associated with lack of power but can be employed strategically by women executives to create inclusiveness, teamwork, and cushion the risks of confrontation during decision making.

Studies involving research on hedging within businesses have been increasing over the past few years, and the research has concentrated on importance of the same in organizational communication, specifically on leadership. An important note is that through hedging, female leaders have made use of the aspect of balancing authority and collaboration. According to Clifton and Leach (2004), during business meetings that are presided by females, the act of hedging helps to establish a less competitive atmosphere thus enabling the leaders to encourage and promote cooperation as well as management control. This is particularly necessary in organizations when decisions have to be reached through consensus building and in cases where women leaders might have difficulties of negotiating their positions as leaders in male organizations or in mixed gender groups. In this regard, hedging can play the role of enabling female leaders to tone down their authority without losing the ability to control the course of negotiations and decisions.

Although much has been done related to gender variance in hedging behaviors in male dominated or

mixed gender work environments, there is still a missing piece of literature on the dynamics of female organized meetings. Most research studies have concentrated on the adjustment of language by women to fit in male based working environments (e.g., Holmes, 1995; Cameron, 2007), however, less has been done on how women use hedging behavior in their meetings that are dominated by women, where the power arrangement is not the same. In the article, Gee (2014) has discussed how gender, power, and language interact through workplace communication and it is one of the vehicles through which power can be enacted and presupposed. Nonetheless, little research has been done focusing on the strategic use of language to handle power by women leaders within their respective teams and organizations. Such difference is notable because exploring the idea of hedging in female-led meetings may offer some insightful details on how women leaders expand their power, mark their space along organizational hierarchies, and provide their influence over groups via language.

Besides, the discourse analysis had been one of the predominant methods in examining the role of power in language in the ecosystem of workplace communication (Gee, 2014), so there is a scarcity of literature about the discourse of female leaders. The application of discourse analysis will provide a thorough analysis of language in context, which is why it is a perfect strategy in investigating sensitive areas of hedging in power structures of business meetings between females. Existing research on men-dominated conditions (e.g., Holmes, 1995) was mainly focused on how hedging is an indication of the gendered expectations of behavioral patterns of women in the communication process, yet very few studies exist that would capture how women engaged in leadership positions actually use hedging to man oeuvre their positions. It would be important to gain insight into the way women leaders use hedging in their leadership situations and how this influences the overall power patterns in their meetings because this creates a more complete image of gender communication strategies in leadership.

The aim of this research is to address such gaps in the literature because to date, there is very little research which is gender specific about female led business meetings and how hedging works in such meeting situations. Investigating this idea, the study will adopt the discourse analysis approach, which will examine the various forms of hedging the female leaders engage, ways it is used to maneuver the power structure, and the consequence of hedging in decision-making, authority, and collaboration efforts in female-led groups. Moreover, the proposed study will advance the current knowledge of the language we use in order to be more strategic in commanding power, as well as enhancing unity and equality in an organizational environment, which is demonstrated in female leaders.

To sum up, even though the analysis of hedges was partly conducted in linguistics, at least, regarding gender, most of the studies were aimed at observation of male-dominated setting or stereotypically applied to women. Due to an increasing number of business meetings in which women are the dominant part, there is a desire to learn how the concept of hedging works in practice. This study seeks to fill this gap and provides a fresh context of how hedging influences the communication styles of female leaders and incorporates in the overall area of gendered communication in the organizations.

SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

The significance of this study is that it contributes to a richer collection of studies out there regarding gendered communication in the context of leadership, especially in the female leadership in business category that is under research. The research will help understand the interconnection of language, power, and gender in organizations by examining the role those female leaders played in meetings with regards to the frequency of hedging used during the meetings. It will also create an insight into how hedging may be used as a possible tool to transmit power, bargaining position, and focus on participatory decision-making in a scenario that gendered expectations could influence communication possibilities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the different types of hedging strategies used by female leaders in business meetings?
2. How do female leaders use hedging to navigate power dynamics and negotiate authority within these meetings?
3. Why is hedging employed by female leaders, and how does it affect their perceived authority and leadership effectiveness in the context of business meetings?

HYPOTHESIS

Leaders in the female category are strategic in applying hedging to control power relations within organizations, to ensure teamwork is implemented with authority, which creates stable leadership approach.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research, Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory is relied on where the researchers posit that hedging plays a central role in mediating face-threatening action. Also, the Gendered Discourse theory (Cameron, 2005) structure will be used to understand how language practice, namely hedging, is used to negotiate gendered power within business contexts. The theories of power and authority are involved too in the analysis, namely, the Foucault (1979) ideas of power as being relational and productive in order to comprehend the role of female leaders in building power within organizations through hedging.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative approach, namely the discourse analysis, to help determine how female leaders incorporate the use of hedging during business meetings. Discourse analysis is a well-established practice within the research field of social sciences and linguistics and allows the researcher to analyze how language is constructed and how power plays affect language (Gee, 2014). The approach perfectly fits the task of analyzing hedging since it enables the parametric study of the way in which a language is used within a certain socio-linguistic situation, e.g., a business meeting, and how it represents or contests the power nexus of the given situation.

Factors that will be considered under this study are those that were recorded via audio or video discussions in actual business meetings involving women holding a pivotal role. Such recordings will present vivid, real data of the spontaneous interaction in various kinds of organizations. A purposive sampling approach will be used to make sure that a variety of industries and organization structure are represented and capture various organizational culture and leadership styles. This sampling approach will enable the researcher to acquire a far-ranging set of information that can illuminate how hedging works in various business environments to make the results generalize to an extended environment of women leadership.

There shall be verbatim recording of the meetings so as to ensure that the data used represents the entire scope of a language including hedging patterns like the use of modal verbs, adverbs, vague terms and softeners. The cases of hedging will be identified and analyzed after being transcribed, to establish the frequency of its occurrence and what kinds of situations occur. As an illustration, a leader may hedge so that the effect of a direct instruction may be tempered or even show indecisiveness during a decision-making process. The recognition of such cases can help the researcher reveal pattern in the use of hedging by female leaders to regulate power relations and authority in the department or amongst the leaders.

As the method, discourse analysis would suit the research in particular since it would allow studying the manners of how power relations can be reflected, constructed, and negotiated through the language. This emphasis with regard to what is discussed in female-based meetings will enable the study to not only check the variety of hedging adopted but also how such modes of language strategies relate and intersect with leadership functions to shape group processes. This method is congruent to past studies conducted on the topic of leadership and language in leadership (Clifton & Leach, 2004; Holmes, 1995) and in this particular case it offers a study framework in which language use can be cognizant to power within organizational contexts.

Discourse analysis used by the researchers in this respect also permits the process to identify other minor forms of power negotiations, including the way female leaders negotiate power and inclusiveness, conflict resolution, and collaboration. The described approach can be especially helpful to investigate how the strategy of using hedging can be applied by female leaders, which can be used not only as a gesture of politeness or being answering, but as a deliberate step to preserve or exercise power during the organizational meetings (Goddard & Patterson, 2000; Burr, 2013).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the present study can provide a powerful inference on the confusing role of hedging in female-facilitated business meetings, especially when considering power and leadership. Hedging was also indicated to be complex in nature and female leaders were found to use hedges not only subtly but also overtly as a way of getting through power, cohesion in groups and power bargaining. Within the scope of the given theoretical one, which incorporates the Politeness Theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987) and Gendered Discourse (Cameron, 2005), the results demonstrate that the strategy of hedging is not the indicator of uncertainty or other possible sources of weakness, but it is a tactic that helps to process either interpersonal relations or professional power.

A main conclusion of the research paper was that female leaders employed the aspect of hedging very often to reduce the authority when raised in a situation where certain level of assertiveness could have broken the group harmony or cooperation. This is comparable to prior studies that propose that women have at times been imperiled with the information that they are expected to be more relational and accommodating in their communication with others (Eagly & Carli, 2003). An example is in gatherings where group agreement played a significant role, the female leaders used modal verbs (e.g., could, might) or simply phrases like I think and perhaps to make their orders seem less authoritative and take into consideration other members of the team. This plan has made it easier to create an atmosphere of collaboration, and the working members became more comfortable sharing their ideas since they felt more empowered to do so, thus contributing to enhancing group cohesion. This is in line with the study we carried out by Holmes (1995) and Coates (1993) who observed that women language is more relationship based and inclusive to a larger extent at the cost of immediate authority.

Nevertheless, it was also found that in some cases hedging was used as a way to assert leadership. In this research, the female leaders employed hedging as a strategic way to present an idea or a proposal in a way that it conveyed a participatory tone but at the same time retained control over the flow of discussion. An example of this is when a leader can note what he/she thinks will work and he/she would want to listen to what the other person thinks, which is a kind of expression that brings one idea to the table with an expression of willingness to feedback. This application of hedging enables the leader to exert his or her control over the discussion without feeling too bossy as it gives the balance of the leadership power and inclusiveness. This observation upholds the opinion of Goddard and Patterson (2000), who posited that power could be negotiated through means of hedging in good degree of recognizing the input on the part

of others and yet retaining the centre position of the leader.

In addition, this paper shows that hedging is important when dealing with gendered expectations in the work environment. Women leaders tend to experience difficulties in exerting authority in establishments where they are likely to be viewed to exhibit the masculine characteristics, including assertiveness and decisiveness. The strategic application of the hedging enables the female leadership in the process of avoiding a generally negative evaluation that can be attached to an overly authoritarian or domineering appearance, yet still retain power of control over the decision-making processes (Burr, 2013). The finding helps enrich the general body of research in gender and leadership research which implies that women leaders are very strategic in the way they use language because they adjust their language use to fit the organizational demands as well as gendered demands.

The single disadvantage of this research is the fact that it is only about female leaders and though it still provides an excellent knowledge alongside the way in which women employ the use of hedging, consideration is not given to compare the strategy used with male leaders under the same conditions. Future studies might discuss the variations in the applying of hedging between the female and male leaders so that a comparative discussion between the gendered way of communication might be provided. The next limitation concerns the narrow scope of the discussed study as it is concentrated on the particular situation business meetings and even though the findings are rather interesting, they are not necessarily applicable to the context of all the organizations or to all cultures. It might be beneficial to broaden it and extend it into other professional spheres, e.g., academic or non-profit pursuits, that might provide a more universal picture of the manner in which the hedging tool operates in various leadership situations.

To summarize the findings, the research presents the great importance of hedging in women-dominated business meetings that will provide the new insight into how female executives manage power in terms of language. Through the use of hedging, female leaders can strike the balance between perceived power and cooperation, exercise executive authority without causing alienation of the team members, and even challenge the gendered needs of the professional environment. The results lead to the further research on gendered communication in leadership and offer feasible information about the effect of language in leadership administration in companies.

FINDINGS

Results of the study give some strong suggestions about the application of hedging by women leaders in business meetings, mostly on the interaction of linguistic options with power dynamics. In the analysis, the major hedging devices that have been identified are modal verbs, adverbs, vague expressions, and hedging phrases which are I think, perhaps, maybe, and could be. These appeals were often used by the female leaders in diverse business situations such as planning sessions of a project or a decision-making session.

Hedging tools included modal verbs, i.e., could, might, and would, which were the most frequently used as a means of softening statements and proposals. As an example, one of the female leaders noted, "This may be a good strategy, I like how you think, but please what is your thoughts on this," which displays a weak stubbornness in the proposal and yet provides some direction to the group. Such use of modal verbs enables the leader to declare a potential course of action without making the final decision, expressing the willingness to accept the feedback and collaboration in the team.

Inclusion of such adverbs like maybe and perhaps was also very common in trying to moderate

suggestions and recommendations. As an example during a budgetary allocation meeting, one leader asserted, "We could probably think of reallocating certain budget but we might as well talk more on this matter." Such application of hedging enables the leader to present an idea without turning it into a command hence fostering shared decision-making.

The effective employment of hedging as a way of controlling power in matters where a consensus is necessary by the group members was also another major finding. Hedging was employed to assist in the top leadership amongst women so as to assist inclusion and seeking input as a leader who is not an authority figure. Nonetheless, in a more controlling upon occasions, hedging was employed to direct discussions without loss of control. In the example of giving a recommendation to solve a conflict, a leader stated, I believe that this could be the course of action but I am certain of what you think. This strategy made the leader retain the steer on the conversation but the experience of the team was not ignored.

As far as the study is concerned, the role of hedging as a mean of balancing collaborative leadership and decision-making was also pointed out. The women leaders also used the strategy of hedging when their power was likely to be questioned when their assertions were toned down such that they upheld a cooperating atmosphere without underrating their position of leadership. The above results correlate with, the findings of Holmes (1995) and Goddard and Patterson (2000) who determined that when gendered leaders negotiated power, hedging was a strategic approach.

CONCLUSION

The research will offer useful evidence into how the value of hedging can be applied in female-led business meeting and how language is used as a resource in negotiating power. This study has helped us understand the way that female leaders deal with power and cooperation within the organizational context by looking at the practical application of hedging. Findings imply that hedging is not only an uncertainty/deference indicator but a strategic communication asset used by female leaders to achieve the balance between being authoritative and inclusive, regulating virtually group processes, and implementing the decision-making process.

The research has massive connotations on the gendered communication tactics in management. It brings to light the intricate methods through which women leaders use hedging to influence without being too dominant in a leadership demeanor that supports a collaborative leadership that enhances their cohesion and effective decision making. This is especially pertinent in the workplace environment where gender norms can possibly affect that interpretation of leadership. In reviewing the nexus of the language, gender and leadership, the paper will fill the research gap in expanding the research on gendered discourse as well as offering the knowledge of effective communication techniques that can be used in effective leadership.

In the context of organizational communication in general, the findings lead to the fact that there is still a gap in the research on the work of linguistic strategies such as hedging when interacting with various types of leadership and in various contexts. More research might be conducted to find out how to hedge during male-dominated meetings or within other industries to give a comparative study of how gender affects the communication practices during leadership endeavors. Also, diversifying the context in terms of including cross-cultural values would widen our understanding of the effectiveness of hedging in various organizational settings. All in all, this paper highlights the necessity to see how language has a lot of influence in the subtle manner in which it defines the leadership practices and organizational outcomes.

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