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Navigating the Indonesian workplace hierarchy: Managers' use of humour as a rapport building strategy

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ABSTRACT

The recent legislation enforcing male and female equality in the Indonesian workplace and the gradual increase of Indonesian women in leadership positions has generated religious debates treating gender equality as a Western hegemonic influence and a contradiction to Indonesia's cultural values. These sociopolitical changes have created new discourse practices which male and female leaders now need to negotiate. To address these novel gender and linguistic practices and extend the limited research on leadership discourse, this research investigated the manager's use of humour as a politeness strategy in Indonesian business meetings. Previous research identified the formal nature of business exchanges, the importance of hierarchy and respect for authority in the workplace. Using the discursive approach to politeness, the concept of relational practice and communities of practice, this paper examined male and female managers' deployment of humour in Indonesian meetings. The study revealed that both male and female managers widely adopted humour mainly to promote group solidarity and cohesiveness. Female managers also utilized humour as a device for mitigating their criticism of male staff, and asserting power and authority. The deployment of humour by both male and female managers to enhance collegiality reflects changes in workplace discourse and may be characteristic of Indonesia's modernization and the influence exerted by global forces.

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1. Introduction

Leadership styles has been the subject of investigation in recent research especially, as females worldwide are increasingly adopting leadership positions in organisations (Holmes, 2005; Holmes and Marra, 2002; Mullany, 2003, 2004, 2010). This increase in the number of women in leadership roles has been observed very recently in Indonesia, which for years has been a highly patriarchal and religious society, that has privileged men as the primary income earners. The changing role of women has been met with criticism by religious groups, both of Islamic and Christian faiths who have questioned the rights of women to adopt leadership roles. The history of Indonesia, the highly patriarchal society and the religious opposition have worked together to generate many challenges for women leaders, especially in their effort to communicate with male and female team members effectively.

In light of the recent political and social changes and the newly established gender roles in Indonesia, this study examined male and female leadership politeness in the workplace. It also extended previous sociolinguistic research on leadership

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politeness and workplace discourse by examining the role of humour in the Indonesian workplace context as it is utilized by male and female managers in business meetings.

The paper begins with a discussion of the history of the role/status of women in Indonesian society which elaborates the context of the present research. This is followed by a presentation of research on the use of gender specific politeness in the Western and Indonesian contexts. This ends with an overview of research on workplace humour as a relationship building activity, which is the focus of this research paper.

2. Research background

2.1. The Indonesian context

Indonesia is a highly diverse country, consisting of many ethnic groups, traditions, religions and influences (Blackburn, 2004). Islam is the dominant religion for 90% of the population and many customs and traditions have been adopted from Islam into the national culture (Hibbs et al., 1996). Islamic beliefs and values have influenced Indonesian gender roles as well as sociolinguistic codes of behaviour.

Before the 1900s, the Indonesian state upheld the patriarchal notion of *kodrat*, a belief which projected men as the primary income-earners and women as the child-bearers and housewives (Blackburn, 2004). This traditional status differentiation between men and women has been strongly contested by several key Indonesian women, as they have striven for Indonesian women's equality, particularly in education and work opportunities (Blackburn, 2004). In the New Order, the era of the second president Soeharto (1966–1998), Indonesian women occupied multiple roles; reproductive (childbearing and childcare, domestic maintenance activities, and community obligation roles) and productive (income earning), although the reproductive role was their main obligation (M. Ford and Parker, 2008). After Soeharto's retreat, Indonesia shifted from the New Order to the Reformation Era. The country experienced a shift from highly hegemonic masculinity influenced by the notion of *kodrat* and beliefs that it is the women's destiny to serve the males in the family, to an effort to achieve gender equality.

This change brought with it an increase in the percentage of women participating in the workforce (Ozbilgin and Syed, 2010). However, Indonesian working women still have very limited status and power (M. Ford and Parker, 2008). After long battles and much effort from many Indonesian females, the Indonesian constitution finally guaranteed women the same rights as men in the areas of education, voting and economic participation (World Population Review, 2015). Women's roles were adapting to the needs and demands of a modern society from the domestic to public domain.

Although the roles of women in the workplace reflect modernity, traditional religious beliefs are still dominant in most parts of Indonesian society, and restrain females from reaching top levels in the workplace (Robinson, 2010). Only very few women have adopted managerial roles due to the many challenges, such as ideology, deeply rooted cultural beliefs, and traditional practices that constitute barriers that must be overcome (Murniati and Nunuk, 2004; Salim, 2012).

The transformations in the roles and status of Indonesian males and females have resulted in new discourse practices in the workplace. Women leaders have had to adopt different discourse styles to communicate with other male leaders or their staff. These transformations are often discussed in association with the trend of democratization in the Indonesian government, the influence of Western values and globalization (Robinson, 2010).

The uniqueness of this complex social and political situation provided fertile ground to investigate the way male and female managers operate and negotiate their power in the workplace. Politeness and workplace humour are features with which working staff create and construct social relationships, the focus of this research (Holmes, 2005; Holmes and Marra, 2002).

2.2. Leadership, gender and politeness

Politeness is a fundamental way with which people engage in social and professional relationships (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Notably, it is an essential aspect of effective leadership: it can help moderate the blatant imposition of authority upon staff members and encourage people to think that leaders' decisions are collaborative rather than coercive (Baxter, 2010).

Research on gender specific leadership strategies have been the subject of research mainly in the western context (Asmuß and Oshima, 2012; Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris, 1996; Djordjilovic, 2012; M. Ford and Parker, 2008; C. E. Ford and Stickle, 2012; Markaki and Mondada, 2012; Svennevig, 2012). Only limited research exists on the interaction between leadership, gender and politeness in the Asian and specifically the Indonesian context, which are characterised by more hierarchical workplace practices (Holmes, 2006a,b).

In the Western context, several scholars (Baxter, 2010; Crawford, 2004; Holmes, 2005; Mullany, 2003, 2008) examined gender specific leadership styles. Hyde (2005), for example, argued that men and women leaders have similar leadership styles; however, other researchers have suggested that there are differences (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Ensher and Murphy, 1997; Gurian and Annis, 2008; Helgesen, 2010; Koonce, 1997; Rhode, 2003). Still, another body of research has highlighted that a combination of masculine and feminine leadership styles and strategies is needed in today's complex and fast transforming world (Claes, 1999; Traves et al., 1997). Good management skills need not be associated with traditional masculine power-oriented and authoritative styles (Ladegaard, 2011).

Similar results have been reported in research on manager politeness; specifically it is argued that men and women use language to play out their power in meetings differently. In a study by Chipunza in South Africa (2007), it was found that

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