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Monitoring organisational boundaries: Diverse discourse strategies used in gatekeeping

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Abstract

Gatekeeping involves monitoring boundaries and is typically accomplished through discourse, especially in organizational contexts. Using data from the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project, this paper examines how gatekeeping is interactionally achieved in ordinary, everyday workplace talk, and in routine encounters between people in the course of doing their jobs. Three different types of gatekeeping encounter are illustrated. The first type extends the traditional focus of gatekeeping analyses by examining the discursive ways in which an applicant contests the institutional criteria invoked for movement through a promotional gate. In the second type of encounter, the gatekeepers adopt a facilitative rather than an obstructive role in relation to institutional gates. The third type of gatekeeping encounter involves more subtle and implicit ways in which people within an organisation 'do gatekeeping' and monitor team boundaries in everyday workplace interaction. The concept of 'gatekeeping' is thus extended to encompass less traditional and authoritarian encounters between superiors and subordinates, as well as more subtle ways in which workplace colleagues negotiate in-house occupational boundaries.
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1. Introduction

Excerpt 1

Context: Regular project team meeting of six Information Technology (IT) experts from a large New Zealand corporation, pseudonymed Company T. The team members are discussing a meeting they plan to attend where people from other teams will be present. Jacob has been seconded to Company T from an American company, pseudonymed Company O. Dudley is the team manager and Barry is the project manager.

1	Jacob:	do you want me to come as well?
2	Callum:	um hmm /[laughs]\
3	Dudley:	/don't wear a\ don't wear a [company O] tie
4	Barry:	[laughs] yeah you can go incognito
5		[general laughter]
6	Jacob:	hide in the back row
7		[general laughter]
8	Barry:	just don't say anything…

   In this short excerpt from a project team meeting, a number of participants make humorous suggestions to a team member who has been seconded from a different, and 'foreign,' organisation, about the conditions under which he may accompany them to a large meeting where they will interact with people from other teams. Each contribution elaborates the underlying proposition, ''you can come to the meeting only if you clearly identify as one of us.'' In other words, Jacob is being asked to blend in and not advertise that he is a 'foreigner' from an outside organisation. This jocular interaction thus nicely indicates the ambiguity of Jacob's insider/outsider status. Inside Company T, he is technically 'other,' but when the team ventures into a wider arena, he is being told to present himself as a well-integrated team member. The witty competitive style in which the team members hand out advice on how Jacob should behave is quite typical of the interactions of this project team (see Holmes and Marra, 2004). The short exchange focuses explicitly on Jacob's status as an 'outsider,' and abruptly foregrounds organisational boundaries which have appeared irrelevant in the extensive technical discussion in which the participants have previously been engaged.[1]
   This excerpt nicely introduces the main theme of this paper, namely a consideration of some of the complex, subtle, and somewhat less predictable ways in which people 'do gatekeeping' in their everyday interactions at work. Drawing on a large corpus ranging from one-to-one discussions between colleagues to large meetings of workplace project teams, the analysis explores how people identify, construct, and monitor a number of different kinds of boundaries in the course of normal workplace talk.
   The notion of the institutional gatekeeper is a powerful explanatory concept in accounting for the discursive patterns identified in a wide range of interactional encounters (e.g., Roberts et al., 1992; Schiffrin, 1994; Sarangi and Slembrouck, 1996). The focus in much previous research, however, has been on processes designed to monitor access to an organisation, institution, or even a country (e.g., Button, 1992; Drew and Heritage, 1992; Iedema, 1997; Eder and Harris, 1999;

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[1] This example is discussed in greater detail in Holmes and Marra (2002a).