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LANGUAGE, GENDER AND POWER: THE USE OF QUESTIONS AS A CONTROL STRATEGY IN WORKPLACES IN KENYA¹

1. Introduction

Language constantly reflects and helps to create the social structures and systems that control us. As a result, one comes to recognise the relationship between language and power. Since positions of power are in general, more often held by men in particular interactions, they (men) contribute to the construction of normative masculinity. As a group, women rather than men are more often excluded from power. With women entering the situations that were previously all male, where established norms of verbal behaviour are based on the ways men behaved in those roles (Coates, 1993), they (women) are faced with real challenges. The relationship between gender and discourse is thus examined. The element of power is also explored. This is made possible through the use of critical discourse analysis; hereafter CDA (Wodak & Fairclough 1997), for the interpretative frame. Actual analysis of conversation is done using conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974) as an analytic tool. The focus is meetings within the corporate world in Kenya. Situations in the meeting where questions occur are noted, analysed and described.

Studies have been done in doctor-patient interaction (Frankel 1984, 1990) and courtroom discourse (Atkinson & Drew 1979, Drew 1992, Harris 1984). In such forms of institutional discourse, questions get asked primarily by institutional figures such as attorneys, doctors and news interviewers (Hutchby 1996). It is however important to mention that in most of these situations, it is the setting that makes these people more powerful, and the number of questions they ask does not quantify their immense

power. Power here therefore depends on the setting, which entrusts these institutional figures with their powerful positions. Questions are however a powerful interactional resource for the simple reason that the asking of questions places constraints on the discourse options, which are available to its recipients. And while individual questions constrain, sequences of questions can constrain more strongly.

In this paper, we look at the workplace discourse, which is also a form of institutional discourse (Kendall & Tannen 1997, Tannen 1995, Holmes 1995). If we want to demonstrate what a versatile linguistic form the question is, and at the same time show how skilful speakers are at exploiting this form, then we need to examine the wide variety of functions that questions perform in any form of discourse. The theme of questions and questioning is an area where gender differences have been noted, in different contexts. We may thus begin with the following assumptions as we enter the workplace;

- That Power-relation(s) somehow exist and determine the course of actual concrete encounters, by focusing on the local management of talk-in-interactions.
- That power may be viewed in terms of differential distribution of discursive resources.
- That these resources enable certain participants to achieve interactional effects that are not available to all, or are differentially available to others in the setting.
- That questions are an example of a powerful interactional resource in that the asking of questions places constraints on the discourse options, which are available to its recipients.
- That the more powerful people/speakers in a workplace situation may employ the use of different types of questions which may suppress and/or oppress their less powerful interlocutors.
- That the less powerful interlocutors in most cases, in the corporate world, are women.
- That the use of questions as a control strategy within conversation analysis may then be just one of the very many factors which may contribute to women not rising up the ranks within the corporate world; above that "glass ceiling".

With these assumptions in mind, we would pose the following questions, What are questions? Who asks questions in meetings in the workplace, and why? How do the speakers in the meeting ask questions? What is the function of questions in such contexts? What types of questions are asked and by who? The one important question for this specific and current research is this; are these different types of questions pegged on gender? Is it possible that they are also pegged on power? Still, is there a possibility of an interplay between gender relations and power/hierarchical relations in

¹ This paper makes up part of my doctoral dissertation which is due to be completed soon. I would particularly like to thank my supervisors Professor Ruth Wodak, and Professor Florian Menz for the guidance they have offered me ever since I embarked on the study. Any shortcomings remain wholly my own.

these contexts? Although there are the ordinary/conventional questions and the Tag questions, I will leave out Tag questions in this study.²

In total, seven management/committee meetings of about two hours each were recorded, and transcribed. These were taken from three Kenyan corporations. However, of the seven, only two which I name meeting A and meeting B have been used for this analysis. Management meetings are important because they are pivotal to the whole company (Boden 1994). It was however important to ensure that the composition of members in the meetings was both male and female. Meeting A had 5 members; 3 females and 2 males and the chairperson was female. Meeting B had 10 members; 5 males and two females and the chair was male. The two meetings were chosen for variability and comparability. They were also to show the effect the gender of the chairperson had. The Meetings were in English, however, any code switching in Swahili etc, or digression from English was all taken into account as part of the data.³ Interviews were also conducted with women in managerial positions who were also a part of the meetings. These interviews were specifically to enhance the corpus.

Meetings were preferred because they are perceived as a necessary and pervasive characteristic of organisational life. They are events that people are required to engage in, if decisions are to be made, and goals to be accomplished. While this is the one ostensible rationale for meetings, they also function as one of the most visible and important sites of organisational power (Mumby 1988; 68). They are therefore a good example of the symbolic structuring of power, and of the reification of organisational hierarchy. Mumby thus reiterates that meetings can be viewed as important, not so much by virtue of what they accomplish, but because they provide a context in which various organisational issues can be played out between those members and interest groups that structure organisational agenda. This is further echoed by Iedema and Wodak (1999), in looking at organisational discourse and practice; Iedema (1999), in his discussion of organisational meaning; Weiss (1999), on his remarks on decision making in European union meetings and committees; Menz (1999), on decision making in business enterprises; Iedema *et al* (1999), in their analysis of meetings in school committee meetings; and Wodak (1995, 1996 & 1997), on her analysis of power and discourse styles of female leadership in school committees meetings.

Moreover, in their discussions of these organisations, and consequently the meetings, these research scholars cited above, discuss extensively the issue of power and authority. Mumby (1988; 68) asserts that meetings are quite symbolic insofar as those

² For readings on Tag questions, see Holmes 1995.

³ In Kenya, English is an official language, while Swahili has the status of both official and national language. Apart from these two languages, there are at least forty different local languages and numerous dialects.

people who occupy positions of power in the organisational hierarchy use this context to signify their power, and thus to reaffirm their status. The role of the chair(person) in a meeting, and the power and authority that this position carries, is thus stressed. Wodak (1995, 1996, 1997) does this quite extensively. There certainly is a relationship between discourse and social power. Consequently, power is interpreted as discursive control (Foucault 1977, Bourdieu 1987, van Dijk 1989). This control is insofar as; "who has access to the various types of discourse, who can and cannot talk to whom, in which situations, and about what. The more powerful the people, the larger their verbal possibilities in discourse become" (Wodak 1996; 65ff). Wodak further says that this is particularly apparent in institutional discourse.

Critical discourse analysts tend to see power as already accruing to some participants, and not to others, and this power is determined by their institutional role as well as their social economic status, gender or ethnic identity (Fairclough 1992, van Dijk 1993). In this sense, social relations of power pre-exist the talk itself, "power is already there as a regime of truth" (Foucault 1980; 131). As a result, in CDA, approaching the role of power in discourse tends to be a question of examining how those members of society who possess it, reflect, reinforce and reproduce it through the language they use; their discourse practices (Thornborrow 2002).

2. Who asks questions?

Questions are one way of handing the floor⁴ over from one speaker to another speaker. If one wants to gain the floor, interrupting is generally considered an effective, though impolite strategy (Holmes 1995, 31). This therefore means that if you want to gain the floor, and yet still maintain politeness, then questioning may be an alternative. However, this depends on the type of question, because different questions function differently in various contexts. They are interactionally powerful devices in that they demand a next utterance, or guarantee a response, and so they serve as ways of ensuring at least a minimal interaction (Fishman 1983; 93, Levinson 1983).

Lakoff (1975) says that women ask more questions than men do. She interprets this as an indication of women's insecurity; a linguistic signal of an internal psychological state, resulting from the oppression of women; a finding which has been hotly contested by among others, Fishman (1983), Holmes (1984), Cameron *et al* (1989), Coates (1996), O'Barr & Atkins (1980). Fishman (1978, 1983) and DeFrancisco (1991) found that women used questions to try and get their male partners to talk to

⁴ Edelsky (1981) examined the differential between women and men in terms of the amount of talk and access to the "floor" as indicators of asymmetrical distribution of social power. She describes two types of floors; "single" and "collaborative", and how this affects the whole interaction process.

them. DeFrancisco further reported that women worked harder to maintain interactions than men, but they were however less successful in their attempts (DeFrancisco 1991; 416). Fishman (1983) also notes that people may ask questions, not merely out of habit or insecurity (Lakoff 1975), but rather because a speaker may feel that his/her attempt at conversation may fail if he/she did not ask questions.

What has emerged from many studies mentioned so far is that generally, women tend to ask more questions in the private and home domains. What about the public sector that was previously dominated by men? Holmes (1988) at a British conference found that men seemed more likely than women to dominate the talking time in status enhancing contexts. She also found that men dominated the discussion time, asking most of the questions. In such formal and public settings, it is not surprising to find that men made up the majority of the audience at almost every meeting. Even in sessions where the number of women and men were approximately equal, men still contributed 62% of all the questions, which followed a presentation. Women appeared to be relatively reluctant participants in these formal and public discussions. What Holmes (1988) does not talk about however, is the status of the various presenters/speakers. This is whether a presenter was a professor or a student, and what effect this status had on the number of questions asked.

Spender (1979) also at a conference, found that males claimed twice as many speaking turns as women, and this was even after efforts by the conference organisers to discriminate favourably towards the women speakers. A similar pattern was observed by Bashiruddin *et al* (1990), Swacker (1979) and Holmes (1988). Swacker (1979) found that although women constituted 42% of the audience, they managed to claim only 27% of the questions following the presentation of the paper (Swacker 1979:157). Moreover, the men's questions were over twice as long as the women's, on average. Male dominance of supposedly shared speaking time was once again apparent. We have generally seen what emerges in the European context. What about the African context, and specifically the Kenyan situation, where the current research has been carried out?

In meeting A, there were a total of 90 questions. Total questions from females were 76, and from males were 14. This made up 84.4% and 15.6%, respectively. Of the number attributed to females, the chair (AFa)⁵ alone had a whole 72 questions. These numbers appear to contradict the current literature on female/male participation on the asking of questions. It is therefore important to note the role of the gender of the chair, and how it impacts on the distribution of questions (in this instance, the chair was

⁵ These are pseudonyms of participants in the meetings. Each pseudonym has 3 digits. The 1st is actually the individual identification running from A to J, and this depends on the number of participants at the meeting. The 2nd digit is only either "F" or "M", and this indicates the sex of the speaker. The 3rd digit is also either "a" or "b", which states whether we are discussing a speaker in meeting A or meeting B.

female). Meeting B had a total of 120 questions. 91 of these questions came from the chair (BMb). This made up 75.8% of the total. This data again points to the power that go along with the "Boss" and his/her status and position in the organisational set up. In the case of meeting B, it seemed apparent that the position appeared even more powerful now that the chair was both the senior most member of the meeting, and also "male".

At face level, meeting A seems to be different from what Holmes (1988) seems to have found. The similarities only emerge when we begin to delve further and critically into it. In the first place, the female participants were more than the male participants in this meeting, unlike most studies carried out in such public and formal domains; there were 3 women to two men. The chair was also a woman. If we look at the number of questions posed during this session, they were 90. Of these, the total female questions made up 84.4%, whereas the total for male participants was only 15.6%. We would therefore argue that the hypothesis or assumption that men ask more questions than women in the public domain is not correct for this particular situation. If we however look at it more critically, then we realise that this is not exactly the case. We have to bear in mind the fact that the chair was a woman, and the chair has the prerogative, as the boss, to steer and lead on the discussion, and also to ensure that the meeting comes to its logical conclusion. In this instance, we have what seems to be an interplay between gender and power. Also remembering that we have already mentioned that questions are an important means of generating talk, and are interactionally powerful devices that serve as ways of ensuring at least a minimal interaction, then we may begin to understand why in this case, questions from females in total was about five times more than questions from males. This is particularly evident when we look at the quantity of the chair's questions.

If we separated the chair's questions from the rest of the questions from the females, then we notice that female questions now remain a mere 5.3% of the total questioning percentage. This can be compared to the 15.5% of the total percentage of the questions from the males. What emerges therefore, is that the assumption still stands, that men ask more questions than females, and this is particularly true in the formal and public situations where status-enhancing tasks are always performed.

So, why is it that women appear relatively reluctant participants in these formal and public discussions? It appears evident that men were responsible for the majority of questions in most of the meetings that I recorded. In situations where this was not the case, the chair was usually a woman, and at the same time, the female participants were more than their male counterparts. Considering the positioning of women in society, this is rather an unusual situation overall in this sample of formal public meetings. However, as already pointed out, it was only at surface level that women seemed to have more questions. If you did a critical analysis, then the men's questions were still more.

Apart from situations where the chair is a female, cases where women would ask more questions than men may include cases where prior to the meeting, women had been given tasks to perform, and report back the outcome in the next meeting. In this case, the woman may claim expertise in the area, and may ask questions as regards the area, and can also be in a position to answer questions that regard that aspect. Generally speaking therefore, women were much more likely to contribute to the discussions when there was a woman speaker or chair, or when there were more women in the audience, and also when the topic was one on which they could claim expert knowledge (Holmes 1992; 141). As regards the position of the chair being assumed by a woman, we can see the interplay between power and gender. Power and status within a company may over ride gender. That is why the chair seems to have very many questions despite being a woman.

When we look at these factors that have been stated above as possibly increasing the women's level of participation in the discussions in the corporate world, then we are left with a possibility of explanations as to why women generally contribute less than men in formal public interactions, and even ask less questions.

Holmes (1992; 142) advances a number of possible explanations for this phenomenon. Firstly, she says that women may find formal settings uncomfortable and unwelcoming. Women are frequently a numerical minority in these contexts. To compound the situation, the rule of interaction are formal and have been defined and developed by males. However, when there are more women present, or when the presenter is a woman, as in some of my meetings, the situation may be less threatening for the women. They may then tend to be more active, taking significantly more turns, and even asking more questions.

Secondly, it is possible that women feel that in order to question speakers in such contexts, or even make a comment, they need to be particularly well informed. Ignorant questions may be perceived as probably insulting to the speaker. It is possible that by avoiding asking questions, women may be expressing negative politeness to the speaker, or not wanting to impose on the speaker (Holmes 1995, Thomas 1995, Brown & Levinson 1987). Women may also be protecting their own positive face needs by avoiding accusations that they are not adequately informed. These accusations may come out if they expose their "ignorance if any" through the question asking process. The fact that the women who did often contribute were experts on the topics supports these interpretations.

Thirdly, Holmes says that it is possible that women assess the situation in terms of the positive face needs of others. Usually, after a presentation or performance of a specific task by a member, it is generally regarded as desirable that there is some discussion at the end of it, and this could be in form of questioning. If this does not happen, sometimes the task or situation may be considered a failure. In most of the formal

situations, however, there are plenty of men to fill in the gap. Women may participate more when they fear that no one else may, and yet they feel the need to save the face of the presenter. Moreover, they may feel particularly concerned to protect the face of the women presenters in this respect, possibly as a mark of solidarity. Express positive politeness in this context will thus involve women asking questions that may already seem obvious.

In the next section, we look at the types of questions asked, and also the functions of the different types of questions in different contexts. We ultimately ask ourselves if the methods of asking questions are different as regards the gender of the questioner. If this may be the case, we may also ask why it is so.

3. Types of questions and the functions of each type

The types of questions vary according to the situation, and these may be slotted into broad categories. The functions also depend on the kind of context we have at hand, whether it is the private and casual context, or it is the public and formal context. Coates (1996) outlines eight functions of questions in the casual, private conversations, and specifically in the talk of women. We may realise that the boundaries between some functions in the private and the public domain may be quite fluid, and so they may even tend to overlap in some aspects. I will not however discuss the functions in the private domain here.⁶

Looking at the public domain, we examine the kinds of questions and comments that women produced, and compare these to men's questions. This may give further light on the conversational patterns of both males and females. This may also further explain whether the language styles are at the speaker's disposal to discriminate against either women or the other sex.

Generally speaking, we can divide the types of questions into two broad categories when dealing with conversational groups. Holmes (1995; 49ff) says that it is useful to distinguish between response-restricting and facilitative or supportive questions according to their function in context. Response restricting questions are more often of the Yes - No answers, whereas facilitative questions are usually more than one word answer. She found that response restricting questions were generally more frequent than facilitative questions. She also found that more men overly used considerably more response restricting questions (88%) as compared to women (66%). This she says is because females tend to use more facilitative or supportive questions than males, opening up discussion and encouraging others to participate. Males on the other

⁶ See Coates (1996) for a wider discussion of this.

hand use "organising" questions, or questions that restrict responses to short factual statements (Holmes 1988).

Apart from the category of Response restricting and Facilitative questions, we would yet look at another broad category identified by Holmes (1992; 1995). I find this categorisation more relevant for the analysis of my work as far as the participation of the different genders is concerned. Three broad categories are thus identified, when we look at the function of questions in relation to formal and public situations. These categories, Holmes labels as supportive questions, critical questions and antagonistic questions.

Supportive questions imply a generally positive response to the content of the presentation. It may invite the speaker to either expand or elaborate on some aspects of it. Supportive questions also provide "openings" and invite the speaker to develop a point, or expand on an area of their presentation. They are often quite explicitly positive (Holmes 1992; 138). An example is given below (A014):

EXAMPLE 1

A012
Afa: sixty or beyond.
Dfa: (xxx) are we to continue him with the morning?
Efa: Even

A013
Dfa: hmh
Efa: last week he was in the morning(.) I think he is now performing

A014
Afa: He is not changing? I can remember giving him some
Ef: his duties. yeah.

A015
Afa: (xxx) where we found he has been changing, and he has been...
Cma: yeah

Afa's question; "He is not changing" (A014), is in support of what Efa has just said that the said officer could be left on his morning shift since he has now stopped changing and is performing his duties properly. She then goes on to explain previous times when he had been changing his times of work.

Critical questions are a type of questions that are less whole heartedly or explicitly positive, and may contain a hint of criticism. They often consist of a modified agreement, or a qualified disagreement, perhaps expressing a degree of negative evaluation or scepticism. The tone in which any question is expressed is also extremely important in interpreting its function in order to classify it accurately. This is particularly obvious with critical elicitations. A sceptical tone of voice can turn a superficially supportive comment into a critical one (Holmes 1992; 139). We can see this in the two examples given below:

EXAMPLE 2

B066
Afa: ...be given a telephone three months ago, he is not appearing in-

B067
Afa: in our enquiry! and you know the-the production of the-the

B068
Afa: directory takes a whole year! And where are the customers
Efa: mhm

B069
Afa: depending on (xxx)? you know when they call here, they want
Dfa: yeah?
Efa: ((clears throat))

B070
Afa: the telephone number of Mr Bma. Mr Bma has been ...
Bma: yeah

In example 2, the chair (Afa) has been talking about the importance of having an installation done first, and all the procedures put in place such as having the entry in the telephone directory. Now that she is told that it sometimes takes a longer time, she wonders what their customers are relying on as they wait for this key service. She is thus critical of the pace and services being offered by her company if it is to be at the expense of her customers' dissatisfaction (B068-B069).

EXAMPLE 3

A043
BM: ... Pangani, then we also have some who are being dropped at the

A044
AF: yeah
BM: common matatu areas. If we may start with one at a time, but

A045
AF: they should connect?
BM: (xxx) in the evenings (xxx) (xxx) the

A046
AF: you know by starting from the other side we will be...

The main issue in example 3, is that of the workers being taken back home after a night shift. There was a complaint that one of the workers had his bus stage passed by the driver as a result of an oversight. The chair is critical of the suggestion she has been given as to how to solve this transport problem. From her voice, she seems rather sceptical that the suggestion given by a colleague in the meeting would be feasible. That is the reason why Bma interrupts to try and explain the position, but she somehow does not allow Bma to continue with his explanation, and so she cuts in again, and continues with her view. If we were to only read her question, it merely

looks like a supportive one. It is only when we listen to it that we hear the tinge of scepticism in it, thus it becoming quite critical. Also to note is how BMa becomes uncomfortable, and tries to interrupt to justify his point.

We then look at Antagonistic questions. These type of questions generally involve challenging, aggressively critical assertions whose function is to attack the speaker's position and demonstrate that it is wrong (Holmes 1992:140). These antagonistic questions are clearly very face threatening. Somehow on the women's part, it is only the chair who used them. In one instance, she is furious because they are having a very high cancellation rate, and this is not good for the company. Somehow, the rest of the members are aware of the problem, and have even tried to sort it out. However, this did not prevent the chair from airing her dissatisfaction with the whole issue. She actually has a tirade of antagonistic questions in just two turns (lines A276, A279-A281) as the examples below exemplify.

EXAMPLE 4

A275

AFa: ...HOW? and that is why our cancellations are
EFa: they book two calls

A276

AFa: high They do not use the three other numbers?
EFa: yeah No! They just

A277

AFa: and then you alert the training department
EFa: book three calls yeah

A278

AFa: Anybody making that mistake-
BMa: (xxx)
EFa: we have already found out, and the

A279

AFa: How can they
EFa: people who are concerned, we have talked to them

A280

AFa: forget that? Not all of them are forgetting the

A281

AFa: procedures? Even maybe I saw somebody like Cynthia with the...
EFa: mmhm

I would however hasten to add that it was not always easy to determine whether a question was supportive, critical or antagonistic. This is even despite the fact that the descriptions of each type was so clearly laid down. What this meant was that we also had to look at the question, in its context of situation; what had come before the question, or what had prompted the question to be asked. Also to be considered was how the next speaker reacted to the question. In many cases, this next response gave

an insight into the type of question at hand, especially if it may have been problematic in its description.

The next question would thus be this, who uses different Questions? Of the 90 questions in meeting A, 56 were Supportive, 25 were Critical and only 9 were Antagonistic. This makes up 62.2%, 27.8%, and 10% respectively of the total number. Figure 1 illustrates this.

Figure 1

TYPES OF QUESTIONS AND THEIR DISTRIBUTION (MEETING A)

QUESTION TYPES	NUMBERS	PERCENTAGES
Supportive	56	62.2%
Critical	25	27.8%
Antagonistic	09	10%
TOTALS	90	100%

Our next question would thus be the following; Of these questions, how many emanated from women, and how many emanated from males? Is there a gender and power interplay? "Who is the boss" question comes up again. Of the 56 Supportive questions, 50 were from the females, and only 6 were from the males (fig. 2). Of the 50 questions from females, 46 were from the chair, and only 4 came from the rest of the women. Of the 25 Critical questions, 4 were from the male participants, and the rest (21) were all from the females. Apparently, they all came from the chair. None came from the rest of the women. Of the 9 Antagonistic questions, 4 were from male participants and 5 were from the female participants. Again, all these 5 came from the chair (look at fig. 3).

As had earlier been mentioned, most questions in meeting A, came from the female participants, given the fact that the chair was a woman, and also the ratio of females to males was 3 to 2. Questions from the male participants made up 15.6% of the total number. Of the 56 supportive questions, 6 were from male participants. These made up 10.7% of the total supportive questions. Of the 25 critical questions, 4 were from male participants, and this made up 16% of the total critical questions. Finally, of the 9 Antagonistic Questions, 4 were from the male participants. This made up 44.4% of the total antagonistic questions. This means that female participation of antagonistic questions was 55.6%. Interestingly enough, they all came from the chair who also doubled up as a woman (an indication of the powerful role of that chair status).

Figure 2

DISTRIBUTION OF QUESTION TYPES ON GENDER (MEETING A)

QUESTION TYPE	FEMALE	MALE
Supportive	50 (89.3%)	06 (10.7%)
Critical	21 (84%)	04 (16%)
Antagonistic	05 (55.6%)	04 (44.4%)
TOTALS	76 (84.4%)	14 (15.6%)

From the figures of the number of times that the males asked questions, it is evident that the highest percentage came from the antagonistic questions (fig. 2). In meeting B also, the highest number of male participation in terms of percentage, was also in antagonistic questions. The question is why? As earlier mentioned, Antagonistic questions are very face threatening. Both the sexes used them sparingly, but as for the female participation, only the chair used them, and even in situations where she used them, it seemed apparent that she was left with little option if any. In fact, the questions do not hinge directly on the members present, but on absent officers who were supposed to have performed other tasks, but under the supervision of the current-sitting officers.

So, although we had earlier said that it was males who used antagonistic questions more, here was a situation where out of 9 antagonistic questions, a woman used a total of 5 questions. So here, we have the issue not only of gender, but also of power. The question "Who is the boss" comes up again. There is a gender and power interplay. The chair is the Boss, and the Boss is a woman. In the specific situations she was faced with, it seemed apparent that she had no other options but to handle the situation the way she did; These were cases of people who had earlier been given tasks to perform, and they had failed to do so. What else was she supposed to do if not to criticise and challenge the whole situation? In any case, as the boss, she is expected to give a tough stance in a situation where things appear not obviously right. It is up to the boss to correct wrong situations within her jurisdiction. It is only through the questioning and pointing out of the problem that she probably hopes the task to be accomplished, and work to return to normalcy. Maybe had the boss been a male, the situation would have been different. That is why we also look at a situation where the boss is male, for the purposes of comparison.

Of the 25 critical questions, 4 were from male participants, and 21 were from the females. Male participation was thus 16%. This was much less than male participation in Antagonistic questions, but certainly more than male participation in supportive questions where the male participation was only 10.7%. What the above situation means is that 84% of critical questions were from the females. Again important to note is the fact that all the 84% came from the chair, whom I will still make a reminder, was

a woman. Again here, we see the gender and power interplay. Power in this case again seems to override gender. Figure three summarises the powerful role of the chair (meeting A) in a committee/management meeting.

Figure 3

DISTRIBUTION OF QUESTIONS AMONG FEMALE PARTICIPANTS (MEETING A)

QUESTION TYPE	CHAIR	THE REST
Supportive	46	04
Critical	21	00
Antagonistic	05	00
TOTALS	72 (94.7%)	04 (5.3%)

Of the 50 supportive questions (already mentioned), only 10.7% were from the men. This means that 89.3%, which was equivalent to 50 questions, was from the female participants. Of this number, only 4 were from the rest of the females whereas the bulk, which were 46 questions, were all from the chair. This again points to the powers that go along with the status of the boss in an organisational set up. As earlier indicated, the boss had to use the questions to steer the meeting and make it move on. We will have to see and verify whether this will also be true of the male chair in the second meeting or it is only unique to the female chair. We would then have an argument for the gender vs. power variable.

Looking at both meeting A and meeting B, we can then begin to envisage the power of the chair in organisational discourse. These two cases may generally be a representation of what takes place in organisations, it appears that status and power may supersede gender, as far as asking questions is concerned. It is only when we critically analyse the different types of questions and their functions within the discourse set up, that other variables come into play, and we may begin to look at the power issue from different perspectives, and even critically evaluate the gender variable and how it interacts with power. A mere count down of questions, and who asked them will not do.

Still on the power issue, although intertwined with gender, we can also ask the question; "Did the more powerful females ask more questions than their less powerful counterparts, both males and females?" As far as meeting B is concerned, the answer is "yes". The more powerful participants in terms of their status in the organisation seemed to have had more questions than their less powerful counterparts. If we look at AFb, in terms of seniority⁷, I found out that she was second to the chair, in terms of

⁷ I got the status and positions of seniority from the company profiles. I was also able to get this same information in the course of the interviews I conducted.



seniority. She was even more senior than the men in the group were. From AFb alone, we had a total of 11 questions. This was more than the questions of all the men put together, but excluding the chair (which was 91). AFb therefore had 9.2% of the questions attributed to her.

DFb was also a senior employee in terms of status and position in the firm, and she had a total of 5 questions attributed to her. Again, apart from the chair and AFb, this was higher than either the males' participation or the females' participation. Therefore, in terms of whoever had the highest number of questions, there was the chair in first position. Following in a distant second position was AFb, and DFb in third position. CMb and EFb both asked three questions each, and they came in, in the fourth position. IM asked two questions, and HMb asked only one question. They were thus in the fifth and sixth position, respectively. FFb asked only one question, and was in the seventh position. The rest not mentioned did not ask any questions throughout the session. Also in terms of their positions in the company, they were more junior than the rest of the members present.

What kinds of questions were asked in the meeting B? In this meeting, supportive questions were 75 out of 120. This made up 62.5% of the total. Critical questions were 30 out of 120, which made up 25%. Antagonistic questions were only 15 out of 120. This made up 12.5% of the total questions.

As far as supportive questions were concerned, 59 were from the male participants, and 16 were from the female participants. This means that males had 78.7%, whereas females had 21.3% of the total supportive questions. In the Critical questions also, male participation was 26 whereas female participation was only 4 out of the total, which was 30; a dismal figure comparably. Male participation was thus 86.7%, whereas the female participation was only 13.3% (Here, less women asked less critical questions, although they still participated minimally). Antagonistic questions were 15. All the 15 came from the males. No woman participant asked a question of an antagonistic nature. In our discussions of the nature and function of antagonistic questions, then you can begin to explain why we would have such a strange phenomenon.

While still on Antagonistic questions, it is also important to note that all of them, apart from one, came from the chair. The chair thus had 14 questions, whereas CMb also contributed one of the antagonistic questions. This also points a finger towards the power of the chair. Only the powerful it seems dare use such types of questions, especially when they know what kind of power within the organisation protects them, to be able to be bold enough to ask them.

4. Summary of meetings A and B

Apparently, most questions in the meeting B were supportive. Most questions invited the speaker in a positive and non-confrontational way to elaborate on his (or more rarely her) presentation, or to develop further a point the questioner was interested in. There were apparent differences between women and men in the proportion of supportive questions. Male participation was higher than female participation in this category. As for critical questions, both genders used much of them, but again, the proportions were considerably different. It was in the relative frequency of antagonistic questions that women and men differed. In the meeting A, antagonistic questions made up 12.5% whereas they made up 10% in the meeting B. The relative performance overall was poor. At the same time, the female participation of the antagonistic questions in the meeting B was nil. Though they constituted a small percentage of the total number of questions, the distribution of antagonistic questions differed considerably between women and men in all the meetings. In their contributions to the discussions in the two meetings, men expressed proportionally twice as many of the antagonistic as women did. In other words, the men explicitly disagreed with, or challenged the presenter significantly more often than women did. So, although generally speaking, the most common type of questions were facilitative and supportive, where antagonistic questions occurred, they were twice as likely to come from a man than from a woman. Why do we have the above scenario?

Antagonistic questions are very face threatening, and women are generally speaking, more polite, and they take more account of the face needs of the presenter than are men. By asking more antagonistic questions, men indicate at the least, a concern with referential content that overrides affective or social considerations. They are more concerned with stating their disagreement or criticism explicitly than with protecting their addressee's feelings.

Holmes (1995) in her study makes a detailed examination of the occasions when women made very critical comments. She observed that these occurred almost always in an environment where criticism and contrary view had been explicitly invited, or where it was clear that criticism was expected as in the presentation of an unpopular controversial policy.

Antagonistic questions may also act as a means of gaining status. From what has already been discussed about status, it is apparent that men are more interested in status enhancing situations than in affective situations. This may also explain why men, more than women use antagonistic questions. A point to note however, is that Antagonistic questions may be risky. If they are convincingly refuted, they may lead to loss of face by the challenger. However, an effective challenge is likely to attract admiration from others who regard interactions as a competitive activity, and so increase the status of the challenger. This scenario is very characteristic of men.

Women however appear to be less willing to engage in this kind of exchange; they rarely use antagonistic questions (Holmes 1992; 50).

The final reason why in the meetings there may be more of supportive questions than either critical ones or even particularly the antagonistic questions, is because very often, aggressively negative questioning may lead people to take up entrenched positions, especially in a public debate. When this happens, then little cognitive progress is ever made (Holmes 1995; 213). Defensiveness is not an attitude, which encourages creative thinking. On the other hand, supportive questions and modified criticisms are much more likely to facilitate good quality open-minded discussion or productive exploratory talk. Women are certainly more interested in the success of conversation and co-operate to ensure that this happens. It is also apparent that while both women and men use more supportive than antagonistic strategies in public seminars, and both used more responsive restricting questions in task oriented discussion, overall, females tended to use the polite linguistic strategies more often than the males (Holmes 1995; 50).

5. Conclusion

From the data, it appears that the more powerful speakers used specific kinds of questions in their talk. Less powerful speakers refrained a lot from using critical questions, and specifically antagonistic questions. On the contrary, whenever they (less powerful) asked questions, you could always bet that these were of the supportive type. The more powerful speakers, it appears, were not afraid of using the critical and antagonistic kinds of questions. And even when it came to the supportive questions, they still used more of these than their less powerful counterparts.

From meeting A, women appear to have more questions than the men. This was because the chair in this case was female, and most of the questions came from her since she had the mandate to steer the meeting as a chair. Looking at the performance without the chair, male participation was however more. Also in meeting B, where the male was chair, male participation appeared to be more than female participation. Males also used the various types of questions more than women. The chair seemingly had more questions than his counterpart in meeting A.

Language and gender oriented research had associated women with questions in negative ways. More recently however, discourse analysts have suggested that questions are in fact potentially powerful linguistic forms. Various studies have established that powerful speakers use more questions than less powerful speakers. This later research has focused on asymmetrical equals. We should however take note

of the fact that the relation between linguistic form and communication function is not a simple relationship of one to one basis.

At the same time, the patterning of specific linguistic forms may be illuminated by many more variables than just gender. These include the role taken by participants in interaction, the objectives of interaction, the participants' relative status on a number of dimensions, and many more variables. One thing to remember is that "women" do not form a homogeneous social group. We have women from Africa, Europe, Asia etc, and they all come with differing cultural characteristics, which are reflected, in their linguistic behaviour. Gender is crosscut with other social divisions, and their relative importance is affected by the specifics of the situation; for instance, in a courtroom or classroom, occupational role is likely to be more salient than any other social variable.

There has/had been a tendency towards automatically identifying the linguistic strategies used by subordinate groups as factual markers of subordinate status. No feminist would dispute that women are generally viewed the world over, and specifically in Africa, as a subordinate group. However, subordinate groups also do negotiate and struggle against the conditions of their oppression. Certain aspects of their social behaviour might profitably be analysed not as a simple demonstration of those conditions, but as a complex way of coping with them, or even a mode of resistance to them.

As indicated in the paper, gender relations in an organisation are crucial and actually determines who asks questions, and even who gets heard. Power and hierarchical relations in an organisation are also very crucial in an organisation in determining who asks questions, and even who gets heard. From the current research, it is pretty obvious that there certainly is an interrelationship between gender and power/hierarchical relations. However, as far as questions are concerned, it appears that, the hierarchical power relations (specifically in an organisation), the power relations seem to tilt the balance in the whole scenario. However, one question still remains, "How many women are in that top bracket in Kenya; to be women, be the boss, and still be powerful?" This is a very critical and pertinent question.

The question may thus really be who are the powerful speakers in a workplace setting? This domain, as has been discussed, had traditionally left out women, and as of today, the picture has not changed very much, and the linguistic equation may similarly follow the same pattern. However, we have slightly more women in these key powerful positions, but as compared to male representation in the same domain, this is still quite insignificant. Women in this domain thus need to work towards negotiating and struggling against the conditions of their oppression in these kinds of settings.

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Abstract

Diese Arbeit betrachtet den Aspekt von Fragen als interaktionale Kontrollstrategie und wie diese in Zusammenhang mit Geschlecht und Macht am Arbeitsplatz steht. Dazu wurden Ausschuss- und Managementsitzungen in Unternehmen in Kenia aufgezeichnet, transkribiert und sowohl qualitativ also auch quantitativ analysiert. Es stellt sich heraus, dass Männer und Frauen auf unterschiedliche Weise Fragen stellen und verwenden. darüber hinaus gibt es Unterschiede in Bezug auf die verschiedenen hierarchischen Stufen. So ließ sich bei jenen Personen, die das Gespräch und die Interaktionen in den Sitzungsräumen "kontrollierten", ein eindeutiger Zusammenhang zwischen Geschlecht und Macht/Status erkennen. Diese Beobachtung kann demnach als Spiegelung dessen interpretiert werden, was letztendlich in den Unternehmen insgesamt vor sich geht.