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Gender and Power in the American Academic Community: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Pragmatic Meaning

During face-to-face interaction, people do more than exchange information; they also establish and reaffirm their social relationships through the language they use. Discovering and describing how they do this has been part of the research agenda of sociolinguists and discourse analysts for many years. Past research on gender and power roles have identified a limited but informative set of variables that define how men and women in differing status roles use language to achieve their goals while remaining within the confines of the social structure at hand. Together, these variables can be applied to a large body of spoken data for a fuller understanding of talk in interaction.

The purpose of the current study was to examine gender and power roles within the American University through the investigation of a variety of variables in a 400,000-word corpus of spoken academic language. Variables fell into three main categories: linguistic, situational, and pragmatic. The selection of linguistic and situational variables was based on their theorized or empirical roles in language use (e.g., Holmes, 2000), while the pragmatic variable was operationalized as speech act type, identified using an empirically based coding system.

Using a sub-corpus of the TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language Corpus (see Biber, *et al*, 2002), I analyzed the transcribed spoken data quantitatively by applying several computer programs; and, I followed up my analysis qualitatively. Through a combination of computational and multivariate analyses, I identified and interpreted patterns of language use among different combinations of sex and speaker/hearer roles (e.g., male student talking to female professor) within five different contexts of the academic community: office hours, study groups, labs/small groups, classroom management sessions, and service encounters.

In this presentation, I will discuss my findings and describe the significant differences and interactions among the linguistic, situational, and pragmatic features.

References:
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Holmes, J. (2000). Women at work: Analysing women's talk in New Zealand workplaces.
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