



"Sorry, I'm talking too much": Professor Judith Baxter of Aston University, UK, asks whether there is a linguistic glass ceiling in the boardroom.

Double-voicing: Women's talk in the boardroom

We all read news reports about women failing to make it to the top jobs in Britain and elsewhere – but we are rarely told that there may be linguistic reasons for this problem. The usual explanations given are

economic or sociological, such as the lack of childcare provision, the dearth of senior women role models, or taking a career break to have children. But my research shows that women are being held back from reaching the very highest levels in their jobs because of the difficulties they find in speaking directly and with impact in high intensity,

workplace meetings.

The annual Female FTSE Board report from Cranfield University School of Management tells us that the proportion of women on the boards of leading, national companies is only 12.5%, a marginal rise on last year. At the current rate of change it will take 73 years for women to

achieve equal representation on the boards of Britain's top companies, according to The Equality and Human Rights Commission.

In a recent project at Aston University into the speaking patterns of men and women at work meetings in seven major, national companies, I learnt that language in the boardroom offers a powerful reason why women still struggle to make it to the top. While on the whole there were very few differences between male and female leadership language – men can be co-operative and women can be assertive – there was one key distinction. Women were four times more likely than men to be self-critical, qualify their comments, speak indirectly or apologetically when broaching difficult subjects with board members or when managing

conflict. Senior women engage in a kind of linguistic 'second guessing', adjusting their language to make the right impact on colleagues. They will make a range of hedging comments such as "I am probably speaking out of turn, but..." or "Sorry to cut across you like that but..." and "I realise I am no expert like the rest of you, but...." At one meeting I observed, I heard a woman director, who had spoken just twice in the meeting, say: "Sorry, sorry, I'm talking too much, I'm talking too much." The men nodded, as if they agreed with her!

I have borrowed the concept of "double-voiced discourse" from the Russian philosopher, Mikhail Bakhtin (1895 – 1975) to understand why women speak in this way. According to Bakhtin, single-voiced discourse seeks in a

straightforward way to name, inform, express and represent the topic to which it refers. Whereas a speaker using double-voiced discourse has a double agenda: to represent the topic under discussion *and* to adjust their language to take account of interlocutors' views and concerns. Bakhtin suggests that speakers using double-voicing are trying to protect their own standing by pre-empting the thoughts and intentions of other speakers.

Why do women use double-voicing in senior meetings? I suggest that this may be partly driven by the visibility of women's minority position on their way to the top. Senior women often *stand out* as exceptions to the norm of male leadership, and as a result, their words may be under much greater scrutiny than those of



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their male counterparts. In such a setting, a woman may use double-voicing as a response to the threat potential of this greater scrutiny. It is arguably an essential survival strategy in a man's world. So I often saw women using double-voicing when they were facing criticism or handling conflict. While men tended to use straight talking and if necessary, confrontational tactics, women avoided being directly confrontational and used a range of pre-emptive strategies like politeness or humour to preserve colleague alliances and their own standing.

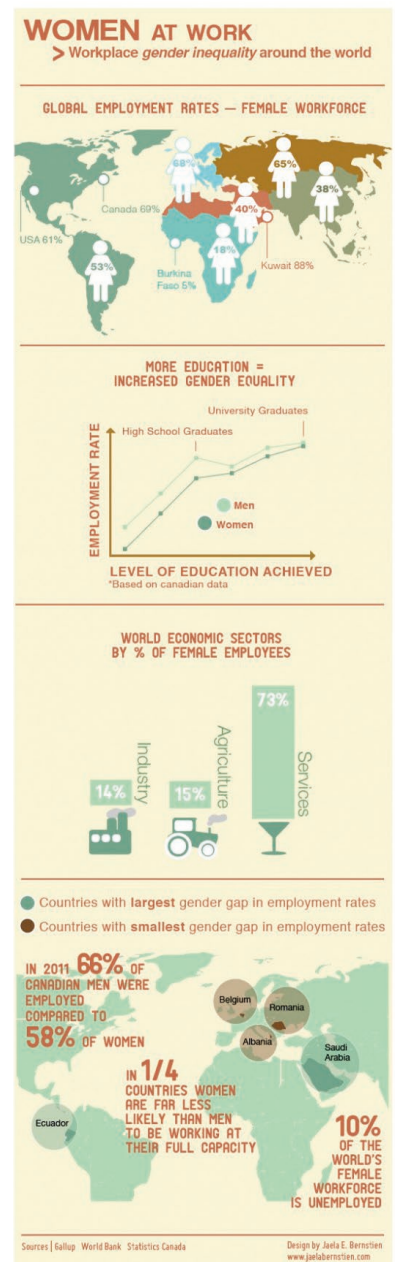
When I interviewed senior women and men about their language use, I discovered that women's use of double-voicing was viewed negatively by *all* colleagues. Women were often accused by their colleagues of not being fully in control of their arguments, which could lead to a loss of respect and authority during meetings. Women's use of self-criticism and an apologetic style were seen as risky for leaders, as it could make them appear defensive and weak. In the eyes of colleagues, this lack of linguistic authority and confidence in meetings not only made it difficult for women to progress, but could actually put a lot of women off aiming for top positions.

In a recent interview in The Sunday Observer, Helena Morrissey, named one of the most influential women in the City of London, who oversees investments worth £47bn as well as her family of nine children, agreed with my findings about double-voicing. In this interview she said, "It is hard to generalise because there is a spectrum, but actually the women I have worked with over the years certainly don't seek confrontation and would tend

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to try to avoid it, which would be consistent with this pre-empting of criticism and anxiety, I suppose; hedging, using humour to soften things. There are some men who enjoy a good fight, enjoy confrontation, but I don't think I have met any women who want to spark an argument, while I have seen men in the context of mainly male-orientated boardrooms or senior discussion almost seem to push somebody to have that discussion in a quite confrontational way. It is not only that women speak differently, but they are also trying to avoid what will happen next, and this is their style to get there."

Morrissey, the chief executive of money management firm Newton, said she did not want women to start acting like men, but they should be conscious of their language. "It may be seen as a bit of weakness on the part of women, because you are not playing the game in the same way. Maybe subconsciously there is a feeling that this person isn't as decisive, can't hold her own, is unsure of her arguments. Don't say 'you aren't going to like this'; just say it and know that is not making yourself be like the man. You will get your point across and no one is going to think badly [of you]. Well they might, but that is all



part of the discussion and the hammer and tongs."

But being assertive still holds stiffer penalties for women than for men. When senior women need to be forceful, they say they are judged much more harshly than men – by both male and female colleagues. Men and women view confrontational women as 'scary', 'tough', 'mean' or 'bossy', and female colleagues may perceive them as distant, unapproachable and 'one of the boys'. Thus, many senior women tend to play it safe, using supportive, indirect

talk which may characterise them as harmless, but lacking in serious personal power. Despite years of equal opportunities, women leaders are still seen as transgressing the boundaries of femininity if they 'talk tough'. This professional taboo needs to be challenged if boardrooms are to become more welcoming places for women in the future.

I suggest that double-voicing need not be a sign of weakness, but could actually be a source of strength. Indeed, it could be developed as a useful tool for senior women to manage those around them. Double-voicing could be a highly sophisticated strategy to consolidate team relationships while achieving a female leader's own agenda. I saw the case of Julie, a woman Human Resources director who had to announce a major restructuring of jobs in her company leading to job changes and losses. Rather than simply dumping the bad news on her team, she indicated that she knew what her colleagues must be thinking and feeling, then tried to address their perceived concerns:

Julie: "err I think really this is the top-line level structure that you will have seen (pointing to a chart) and I thought some of the questions and thoughts that might be in your minds like err (.) what's going to be the role of the Deputy Group HR Director (.) it was certainly one that was in mine so err I'll pose and answer it as best I can for you guys."

Julie's effective use of double-voicing here helped to dilute the criticism she might have received personally, and provided the way for a constructive discussion among her team.

In these various examples I have given above, we can see that double-voicing is actually a double-edged sword. If women

wield this weapon too often when they are on the defensive, it can cause self-inflicted wounds. But if double-voicing is used more expediently – that is, as a deliberate linguistic strategy for engaging colleagues at difficult moments – then it could become a highly constructive tool for leadership.

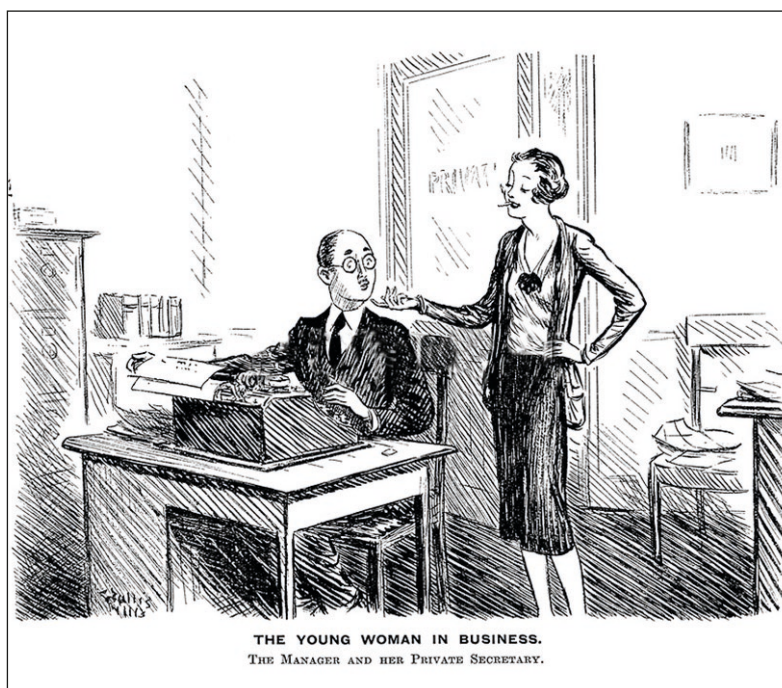
In sum, many women rising up the corporate ladder have learnt to use double-voiced discourse, the ability to second guess their colleagues' agendas. This involves serious linguistic work such as the carefully judged use of apology, humour, self-mockery, understatement, implied meaning and deference in order to minimise direct confrontation or criticism from male colleagues. All this linguistic effort should not go to waste. Double-voicing could be turned into a sophisticated linguistic skill, showing a real subtlety in handling difficult colleagues. By using double-voicing in more strategic ways, women could talk their way to the top. ¶

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Find out more

Book

Baxter, Judith (2014) *Double-voicing at Work: Power, gender and linguistic expertise*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.



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