

Professional and personal identity at work: achieving a synthesis through intercultural workplace talk [1]

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Abstract

This paper analyses the ways in which professional migrants from different cultural backgrounds, using English as an Additional Language, manage the demands of constructing a positive professional identity while also negotiating the complex relational aspects of workplace talk. The well-established methodology of the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project was used to collect relevant data from migrant workers interacting in professional New Zealand organisations. The analysis focuses on the socio-pragmatic strategies used by two skilled migrants to manage identity construction through social and transactional aspects of workplace interaction. The implications of their different approaches to the challenge are discussed.

Keywords: workplace discourse, intercultural interaction, socio-pragmatic competence, professional identity, relational talk.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, New Zealand has attracted professional migrants from diverse cultural backgrounds with much-needed expertise and the potential to make a valuable contribution to New Zealand society. Employers, however, repeatedly identify inadequate communication skills as problematic in workplace interaction, and cite this as a disincentive to hiring migrants. Identifying the communication challenges faced by skilled migrants is a complex task, complicated by the indubitable fact that culturally different ways of doing things are widely regarded with suspicion, and evaluated negatively by many New Zealanders.

One particular communication challenge which skilled migrants regularly face in the workplace is the task of conveying the fact that they have extensive expertise and experience in a way that is compatible with the New Zealand egalitarian ethos in the workplace. The tall poppy syndrome which cuts down any who dare to raise their heads above the crowd presents a challenge for many New Zealanders in positions of authority.[2] It is an even greater challenge for those from cultures where those with professional skills are expected and encouraged to display and (from a New Zealand perspective) even flaunt them. Managing the synthesis between behaving in an appropriately professional way, while also constructing strong collegial relationships at work requires considerable socio-pragmatic proficiency. This paper describes the ways in which two professional migrants responded to this challenge.

The research context

Over the past two decades, New Zealand has successfully attracted professional migrants with a range of important and relevant experience and skills. Evidence for this success is provided by a number of research studies by New Zealand sociologists and social psychologists (Carr 2004; Podsiadlowski 2006, 2006; Spoonley and Davidson 2004). Many, however, find themselves unemployed or under-employed in relation to their qualifications and expertise, as New Zealand sociologists have demonstrated (Carr 2004; Spoonley and Davidson 2004; Trlin et al. 2004; Ward and Masgoret 2007; Hunter 2007). When asked why they do not employ more skilled migrants, potential employers regularly cite inadequate communication skills as a major disincentive (Henderson et al. 2006; Henderson 2007; Hunter 2007).

There is a considerable amount of socio-pragmatic research indicating that migrants' communication problems can often be attributed to lack of understanding of culturally different communicative styles, and the negative preconceptions of native speakers of English, rather than to English proficiency per se (eg. Bardovi-Harlig 2001; Kasper 2001; Rose 2005; Rose and Kasper 2001). Despite this widespread acknowledgement in the literature, there is relatively little research on the socio-pragmatic factors affecting intercultural communication difficulties in professional contexts (but see Duff, Wong and Early 2002; Kotthoff and Spencer-Oatey 2007; Hunter 2007; Geluykens and Kraft 2008). Moreover, much of the research that has been undertaken focuses on academic contexts or on the job interview situation both overseas (eg. Roberts, Davies and Jupp 1992; Campbell and Roberts 2007; Johnston 2008), and in New Zealand (Couper 2002; Ward and Masgoret 2007; Mace et al. 2005; Henderson et al. 2006), and very little is located in workplaces (but see Willing 1992; Clyne 1994; Myles 2005; Hunter 2007).

Socio-pragmatic skills pose a particular challenge for skilled immigrants, because difficulties with subtle socio-pragmatic aspects of communication are often perceived negatively (Akinnaso and Ajirotutu 1982: 119; Jupp, Roberts and Cook-Gumperz 1982: 234), and interpreted as (possibly intentional) impoliteness (Riddiford 2007). But socio-pragmatic skills are vital in the process of becoming an accepted member of a workforce (Holmes 2005a). The ability to use language effectively in intercultural interaction is key in gaining a job interview, and performing successfully in an interview situation (Akinnaso and Ajirotutu 1982; Kerekes 2005; Campbell and Roberts 2007). And then, once this barrier has been successfully surmounted, socio-pragmatic skills are crucial in constructing and maintaining good collegial relationships with workmates.

In the last decade, research has increasingly focused on ways of assisting professional migrants who find themselves unemployed in a new country with an unfamiliar set of cultural and interactional norms (eg. Clyne 1994; Kasper 2001; Myles 2005; Kerekes 2006, 2007; Henderson et al. 2006; Hunter 2007). This paper documents a contribution to this research in the New Zealand context. Using two exemplary case studies, we describe some of the socio-pragmatic complexities faced by skilled migrants as they begin to engage in intercultural interaction in the workplace of a new society.

The Communication Skills course

The two professional migrants who are the focus of this study were enrolled in an English language course for skilled migrants who had been unable to find work in their chosen professions in New Zealand. The twelve-week course begins with a five-week in-class component followed by a six-week workplace placement (with each Monday afternoon spent back in class to de-brief and discuss any problems), and concludes with a final week in class. The course aims to assist skilled migrants to develop communication skills which will facilitate their attempts to gain employment within their chosen profession in New Zealand. One goal of the initial five week block is therefore to develop awareness of characteristic features of communication in NZ workplaces, and to assist the participants develop analytical skills which will empower them to make choices about how to interact in that context.

To this end the course draws on materials developed from authentic recorded workplace interaction between English-speaking New Zealanders, collected by the Wellington Language in the Workplace Project (LWP) team over a number of years.[3] In addition, the extensive analyses of this material by the LWP team provides valuable information about the range of socio-pragmatic skills underlying effective workplace talk. LWP analyses have demonstrated, for instance, the crucial importance of meshing both transactional and relational dimensions of workplace interaction. Effective workplace talk involves achieving workplace objectives and getting things done, while simultaneously maintaining good relationships with one's colleagues. Collecting information and giving directives are typically managed in ways which support the collegial, egalitarian culture which is widespread in New Zealand workplaces. Our analyses have established that there are many ways of achieving these ends: eg. by the skilful integration of social talk into the daily work routine (Holmes 2000, 2005a, 2005b), through the use of appropriate amounts and types of humour (Holmes and Marra 2002), through the choice of appropriate ways of giving directives and making requests (Vine 2004). Ways of managing such aspects of workplace discourse tend to differ from one community of practice to another, so it is crucial to provide learners with the analytical skills to work out what is going on in socio-pragmatic terms in any interaction in which they are involved. As advocated by Byram (1997: 20), the Communication Skills course aims to provide learners "with the means to analyse and thereby understand and relate to, whatever social world

their interlocutors might inhabit". Hence the course prepares learners for encounters beyond those presented in class, and encourages them to see their role not as imitators of native speakers, but as social actors engaging with other social actors in a particular kind of intercultural communication and interaction which is different from that between native speakers (1997: 20-21; see also Byram 2006a, 2006b).

The participants

The two participants in this study have been pseudonymed Helena and Andrei. Helena is in her late thirties, a professional accountant who came to New Zealand from Hong Kong. She had been in New Zealand for several years when she enrolled in the Communication Skills course. Andrei is in his early forties, a senior public relations advisor from Russia who had been in New Zealand for three years when he enrolled in the course. Both agreed willingly to participate in our research project which involved detailed monitoring of their progress in acquiring socio-pragmatic skills from the beginning of the course to the end of their six week internship in an appropriate New Zealand workplace (cf. Williams 2008). In what follows, we focus on the workplace component of the data. (See Riddiford *et al.* for more detail on the additional material collected).

Method

The data used as the basis of the analyses in this article was collected by the Language in the Workplace (LWP) Project team, based at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.[4] Our database currently comprises over 2000 interactions recorded in more than twenty New Zealand workplaces, including government departments, factories, small businesses, semi-public or non-government organisations (NGOs), and private, commercial organisations. The interactions include both business talk and social talk, informal talk and meetings of many different sizes and kinds, with participants from a wide range of different levels in the workplace hierarchy. In this paper we draw on a subset of this larger corpus, namely recordings made in workplaces where professional immigrant workers were placed for a period of 6 weeks.

Using our standard data collection method, we first obtained permission to record from the managing director and any affected staff in the two workplaces where the focus participants were placed for their internships. Each was assigned a workplace mentor and the cooperation of these people was especially important to the data collection. The participants themselves then recorded their everyday workplace talk with as little interference from the research team as possible. In general, we minimised our intrusion as researchers into the work environment, while also carefully managing ethical matters and confidentiality which is always a prime concern, both to those being recorded, and to the research team.

Each of our focus participants recorded about four hours of ordinary everyday workplace talk during the first two weeks and the last two weeks of their internship. This material was then transcribed and forms the basis of the analysis below.

Analysis

In this section we discuss excerpts from the workplace data to demonstrate the ways in which these two skilled migrants enacted their professional identity in their respective workplaces, as well as some of the challenges they faced in handling social talk at work, focussing in particular on areas that appeared to be problematic.

Doing professional identity

We begin with a couple of examples which demonstrate that both participants were able to engage effectively in the fundamental, unmarked, transactional talk which constitutes the bread-and-butter of workplace interaction.

In the first excerpt Andrei is reporting back to Tim, his mentor and colleague, on a task he has completed. He has attended a forum involving representatives from migrant communities and has evaluated their responses to the experience.

Excerpt 1

Context: Andrei is talking to Tim at his desk in their office.

1. And: we've just we've just finished with this er forum
2. Tim: yes
3. And: on thursday and w- friday
4. Tim: mhm
5. And: so it was a busy time
6. Tim: mhm
7. And: er the friday it lasted only till er till twelve o'clock and //then we had lunch afterwards\
8. Tim: /yep sure\
9. And: so I'm n- now filling up er evaluation //forms\ forms
10. Tim: /evaluation\ forms //right\
11. And: /forms\ summing up er so most people were quite satisfied
12. Tim: mm mm
13. And: those who were not quite satisfied were v- re-
//er\ (prese-) er um representatives
16. Tim: /refugees\
17. And: //for refugee\ communities
18. Tim: /oh okay\ so were they
19. And : some were not some were not um satisfied with facilitator //[laughs]\

Andrei provides a summary of the task he has been involved in during the last week. He describes how he attended a forum involving representatives from migrant communities and then analysed the evaluation forms from the people present at the forum (lines 1-10). He also summarises for Tim the results of the evaluation (line 12), and identifies the group who were not quite satisfied (lines 14-17), and the source of their dissatisfaction (line 19). Despite one lexical item which doesn't quite express his intended meaning (he uses "filling up" (line 10) to mean "processing or analysing"), and a struggle with the pronunciation of the word "representatives" (lines 14-15), this is an effective communication and achieves the workplace objective of reporting on an allocated task to the person supervising his work. This is a very representative example of the way that Andrei "does" his professional identity competently through transactional workplace discourse.

The second excerpt illustrates how Helena can "talk the talk" which characterises the accountancy department in which she has been placed. The excerpt is full of technical jargon which demonstrates her professional competence.

Excerpt 2

Context: Helena and Edward are discussing a job she is engaged on at her desk in their office.

1. Hel: yes ah yeah that's the one these +
yeah um one says s is transferred //off this () \
2. Edw: /yes \
3. Hel: but with those serial numbers or any other reference number
so I can't do the transfer that's the only ques-
the only outstanding questions for level eleven
4. Edw: did you er email them
5. Hel: no so I ask I (give) again have you done it
//if you haven't I can do the follow up so I take this back \
6. Edw: /no no no I haven't sure yep thanks \
7. Hel: () and er for the small one
8. Edw: yeah
9. Hel: I comple- () I finished the reconciliation
10. Edw: aha
11. Hel: but four have problems so I send all of them
I already send an email out to ask them
12. Edw: they haven't replied right?
13. Hel: er only one replied

This short exchange provides plenty of evidence that Helena is enacting her professional identity through effective workplace talk. She uses technical jargon appropriately demonstrating her familiarity with the specialised area in which she is working: eg. *s is transferred off this* (line 2), *those serial numbers or any other reference number* (line 4), *I finished the reconciliation* (line 13). She also offers to follow up a task if Edward hasn't had time to do it: *if you haven't I can do the follow up* (line 9). And she shows initiative since she has already contacted people whose accounts have problems associated with them *but four have problems so I send all of them I already send an email out to ask them* (lines 15-16). In short, Helena demonstrates a good grasp of the task-oriented talk appropriate for someone in her position and her discourse contributes to the construction of a capable and responsible professional identity.

Though these excerpts are short due to space limitations, they are representative of the large sections of predominantly transactional talk provided in the recorded material which Andrei and Helena collected. Much of the time, then, these professionals managed to "fit in" pretty well, demonstrating they had a good grasp of the features of discourse and the discourse strategies that doing their jobs entailed. In such interactions, the two migrants construct their professional identities *implicitly* by appropriately and competently managing professional work-oriented discourse.

When reacting to "outsiders" or new interns, however, it is not the proportion of competent professional talk which forms the basis of assessments of their communication skills, but rather their abilities in managing some of the more subtle aspects of intercultural communication, such as the relational aspects of workplace discourse, including the smooth integration of other-oriented talk, small talk and personal talk into their daily interactions with others at work. A few salient "errors" or, from a New Zealand perspective, the use of occasional inappropriate strategies, can be decisive in terms of perceptions of proficiency and degree of "fit" into a workplace culture. In what follows, we focus on what Candlin (2008) has described as "critical moments of interaction" in "crucial sites of engagement" in order to explore potentially problematic areas of communication for skilled migrants.

As noted, excerpts 1 and 2 illustrate Andrei and Helena doing professional identity in an unmarked, everyday routine way: i.e. drawing on their professional experience to do their jobs competently.

However, both these migrants come from cultures where people are expected to assert their expertise quite explicitly, so that others are reassured about their competence and qualifications (cf Roberts et al 2008). Excerpt 3 illustrates how, in line with this norm, Andrei constructs his professional identity in a very explicit way in an interaction with his mentor, Camille, who is older than Andrei and very experienced in the area of public relations in this organisation.

Excerpt 3

Context: informal office interaction in the first 2 weeks of Andrei's internship. Camille and Andrei are discussing the parameters of Andrei's job in the organisation.

[XXX] has been used to protect the identity of the organisation in which Andrei is working

1. And: I er [clears throat] I was involved in the same similar to the similar similar work back in Russia
2. Cam: oh right
3. And: er but for international er financial er institutions like international monetary fund //and the world\ bank
4. Cam: /oh wow\\
5. And: and the European bank for construction and development
6. Cam: oh
7. And: and for our () of ch- chairman and deputy chairman and deputy director of some of the departments were [XXX] departments not just [XXX] /but\\
8. Cam: //mm\\
9. And: [XXX] and then financial [XXX]
10. Cam: right yes
11. And: banking supervision and accounting
12. Cam: that's quite big work
13. And: yes //really big\ the whole um
14. Cam: /yeah\\
15. And: I was a team leader
16. Cam: mm
17. And: and five people reported to me ++ and I w- and I coordinated the (role) for the first deputy chairwomen missus [NAME] she was right hand of chairman of the European bank bank of Europe
18. Cam: oh
19. And: chair govern reserve bank
20. Cam: oh okay one of my brothers is going to Moscow next week

Andrei begins appropriately here by linking what he wants to say to the current context in which his responsibilities are being outlined. In lines 1-2, he indicates that he has relevant previous experience. He then goes on to describe in considerable detail just exactly what his previous position was. In a typical interaction between New Zealanders, the information in the first two lines would almost certainly be considered enough. New Zealanders tend to play down expertise; it would be most unusual to hear someone elaborate their experience in the detail provided here by Andrei. He not only mentions the banks he has worked for (lines 4,5,7), he also lists the important people he has worked for (lines 9-10), and the specific areas that he has worked in (lines 13, 15). He then goes on to provide a detailed account of his role as a team leader of five people (lines 19,21), and finally his role in relation to an important woman, the right hand of the chairman of the bank of Europe (lines 22-24,26).

There is evidence from Camille's responses that she finds this elaborated, explicit professional identity construction a little over the top. Her first response, *oh right* (line 3), is a positive high-pitched polite response, with the *oh* indicating just a little surprise in response to the information being voluntarily proffered (Heritage 1998). Her second response *oh wow* (line 6) suggests that she has recognised that the discourse has moved from the transactional into the personal realm, as this is the kind of enthusiastic supportive response one might expect in an informal social exchange rather than in transactional talk. As

Andrei persists with his self-advocacy, her responses become less encouraging both in form and tone: *oh* (line 8), *mm* (line 12), and her use of *right yes* (line 14) could be interpreted as a signal that it is time to move on to the next topic (Schiffrin 1987; Fung and Carter 2007). Since this does not de-rail Andrei, she produces a positive utterance with falling intonation, which appears to be another attempt to finish the topic, *that's quite big work* (line 16). There is a noticeable absence of response after Andrei's *and five people reported to me* (line 21), suggesting Camille is adopting another strategy to discourage further elaboration. After two more polite but very minimal responses *mm* (line 20) and *oh* (line 25), she finally takes over firmly *oh okay*, and then changes the topic, though, considerately, she selects a social topic on which Andrei is likely to have something to contribute *one of my brothers is going to Moscow next week* (line 25).

This interpretation assumes Andrei regards it as important in this initial phase of his internship to supply evidence of his experience and competence, and that the appropriate amount of such information is much greater for someone of Russian origins than is normal in New Zealand. Research with Russian immigrants in Israel supports this suggestion. Zaldman and Drory (2001) report that Russian immigrants placed great emphasis on the importance of upward impression management in workplace contexts. It is equally possible that, because Camille is not overtly encouraging, or because in Andrei's opinion the response is not sufficiently appreciative, he 'ups the anti' and keeps adding more information in the expectation that Camille will finally be explicitly complimentary about his previous experience. We cannot be sure of the exact reasons for Andrei's behaviour, but the first explanation, relating to Russian norms, is consistent with Andrei's subsequent behaviour in this workplace. He is a confident and assertive man and he continues to inform people about his extensive and significant professional experience throughout the first couple of weeks of his internship.

From a New Zealander's standpoint, Andrei's exhaustive documentation of his previous experience, and especially the claims he makes concerning the importance of his role and status, are unnecessarily detailed, especially in the relatively informal context in which he and Camille are discussing his current work. He is too "bald on record" and, from the perspective of New Zealand interactional norms, Andrei's talk in this excerpt could be classified as inappropriately blowing one's own trumpet. Indeed, given the fact that it is a protracted instance, it would be likely to be classified rather negatively: i.e. regarded as unacceptable boasting or "skiting". The tall poppy syndrome requires New Zealanders to be modest and self-deprecating. Andrei's culturally different mode of operating is problematic from a New Zealand colleague's point of view.

In her workplace, Helena also manages to refer to her previous relevant professional experience, but she does so in a way that is skilfully integrated into the transactional exchange in which she is engaged with her colleague Edward.

Excerpt 4

Context: informal office interaction in the first 2 weeks of Helena's internship. Edward and Helena are discussing the issue of assessment standards.

1. Edw: that's another grey area that we have to solve
2. Hel: always //yeah\
3. Edw: /yeah\
4. Hel: I know always got problem like this
when the time was I work in hong kong
you know we have we used th- the standards
5. Edw: yes
6. Hel: the hong kong standards but when I touched
when we touched th- the account in china + as
7. Edw: different

8. Hel: different and how did they never listen
//they never listened\ [laughs]

9. Edw: /[laughs]\

Helene's syntax and lexis is often not native-like (eg. *always got problem like this* (line 4), *touched* (lines 8-9) rather than "accessed"), but, socio-pragmatically, her talk indicates a good grasp of how to manage the insertion of a claim to relevant experience using an appropriately modest, indirect and off-record strategy. She refers to her previous employment in Hong Kong in order to draw a parallel with the kinds of accounting problems Edward is discussing. The main clause focuses on the issue of the standards to be used: *we used th- the standards ... the hong kong standards* (lines 6,8). Her experience is effectively referenced through the subordinate, embedded clause, *when the time was I work in hong kong* (line 5), which leads up to the main point. She also adds a light touch of humour implicitly lining up herself and Edward as insiders who share the same experiences: *they never listen, they never listened* (line 11-12). The repetition is a very effective rhetorical device here signalling rapport. The exchange gives a strong impression that Helena is on the same wave-length as Edward, and in contrast to Andrei, she has managed to integrate the reference to her earlier professional experience in a way that conforms to New Zealand norms which require self-deprecation, subtlety, and at least superficial modesty.

Relational talk at work

Operating effectively in New Zealand workplaces requires attention to the relational as well as the transactional aspects of interaction. Often this will entail providing appropriate feedback to others and responding in a pro-active way to their talk. An example from the first two weeks of Helena's internship illustrates that she has developed good skills in this area too.

Excerpt 5

Context: informal office interaction in the first 2 weeks of Helena's internship. Edward and Helena are discussing the advantages of working with a diverse set of colleagues

1. Edw: there is some who are quite um quite fast so quite busy

2. Hel: yes yes it's not hard to imagine //and understand\

3. Edw: /yeah yeah\ yeah and um er what's well I call it
good about it is that you you you
you quite learn how to talk to people
with those kinds of attitudes and different ones
so it's different every day you know you you um

4. Hel: talk to face to face may be easier

5. Edw: no but it's too far eh + so the government might spend
/+ so yeah\

6. Hel: /[laughs]\ [laughs]: yeah you got a point:

In this interaction, Helena first provides supportive feedback *yes yes it's not hard to imagine and understand* (line 4) indicating agreement and elaborating to show she has taken Edward's point. Her next comment is a suggestion that *talk to face to face may be easier* (line 8), demonstrating engagement with the topic; she is suggesting that dealing with people with different attitudes face-to-face may be easier than on the phone. When he disagrees with her suggestion on the basis of the expense of flying to Auckland, she responds very appropriately and comfortably, *yeah you got a point* (line 12). At a later point in her internship, Edwards says to her in relation to a task she has been set, *haven't you finished yet*, a comment that could be regarded as a criticism or indirect complaint. Rather than getting flustered or defensive, Helena responds in a relaxed and reassuring tone, *oh er better have a quick look again*, and Edward responds positively *sure*. This is nice evidence of her awareness of the importance of attention to the interpersonal dimension in interaction.

While Andrei too often managed this aspect of talk competently, his recordings also provide examples where, from a New Zealand perspective, he manages the interaction in a way which strikes a wrong note in some respect. Excerpt 6 provides a brief illustration.

Excerpt 6

Context: informal office interaction in the first 2 weeks of Andrei's internship. Emma is explaining to him what he is required to assist in planning a conference (a "national forum"). She suggests he reads a set of files to find out how the previous conference organiser went about the task.

1. Emm: some of the information that's in there might help you towards the national //forum\

2. And: /and\ where did they happen when did they take place

3. Emm: they happened just at quite recently they were in march and april I think

4. And: mhm wh- what in what places

5. Emm: they happened in hamilton

6. And: mhm

7. Emm: auckland no I don't know maybe it was I can't remember whether it was

8. And: no no mm it's alright

9. Emm: christchurch

In this interchange, Andrei takes the initiative and asks questions of Emma: *where* (line 3), *when* (line 4) *in what places* (line 7), and when finally Emma says she can't remember, he responds with *no mm it's alright* (line 12). Questions are an effective means of taking control of an interaction, and it is typically the superior in an interaction who asks direct questions such as these.[5] Given Andrei's position as an intern, working with an experienced and senior colleague, his questions seem rather challenging and even confrontational in this context from a New Zealand point of view. Indeed his workplace mentor explicitly commented to him in a feedback session on what she regarded as inappropriately direct questioning behaviour. Subordinates are generally expected to be deferent and attentive, rather than assertive and demanding. His final reassuring response similarly appears rather patronising. If the roles were reversed and Andrei were the superior, this exchange would be unremarkable. And from his perspective, given that he is trying to enact a professional and experience identity, he is behaving in an appropriate way, taking control of the interaction and asking for the information he needs (cf Thomas 1984: 227; Larina 2008). This is a very interesting example, then, since it exposes the extent to which people expect newcomers in a workplace, however well-qualified and experienced, to behave in a submissive and deferential way until they have become well integrated into the relevant community of practice.

Our final three examples illustrate the challenges that small talk presents to many migrants in New Zealand workplaces. Clyne (1994) has discussed the puzzlement of migrants in Australian factories when faced with the expectation that they would engage in small talk while at work. Migrants from Vietnam, for example, interpreted friendly social talk as intrusive cross-questioning about personal matters (Clyne, 1994: 180). Given our awareness of the importance of social talk in New Zealand workplaces, as demonstrated in the LWP data and analyses (eg. Holmes and Stubbe 2003; Holmes 2005b), the course members had been given a good deal of practice in engaging in small talk. All the course members were able to maintain a conversation which involved discussions of topics such as the weather, sport and public transport. In the following example, Andrei successfully participates in a discussion about rugby, a topic on which any migrant is well-advised to acquire some local knowledge.

Excerpt 7

Context: Tim and Andre and Priya are working at their desks and chatting informally as they work

1. Tim: but um a very sad loss um for wellington
oh no yes for new zealand I think
when crusaders won is that right priya (teasing tone)
2. And: [laughs]
3. Tim: that's very very disappointing...
4. And: so you're not crusaders fan
5. Tim: no no they
6. And: who's who's fan are you?
7. Tim: I I am any other team //but the crusaders\
8. And: /but but crusad- [laughs]\ and she's for crusaders //[laughs]\
9. Tim: /I don't care if you're from south africa\ or from australia
10. And: oh
11. Tim: you have my support
12. And: oh
13. Tim: but saturday was a very very um was very discouraged
14. And: and crusaders won?
15. Tim: um do we have to talk about their win [laughs]
[laughs]: yes yes they won: they won

In this sociable and friendly interchange, Andrei keeps up with the play, and responds appropriately to Tim's humour which entails some teasing of Priya (line 3) and a good deal of humorous overstatement. Andrei works out that Priya is a Crusader's fan and that Tim is not. He laughs at appropriate points and although his responses *oh* (lines 12 and 14) indicate some surprise and the need to process the new information, nevertheless he provides an appropriate feed to Tim at line 16 *and crusaders won?* indicating he has managed to correctly work out the implication of Tim's statement that he was discouraged after the Saturday match.

Elsewhere Andrei's contributions are not always quite so adept, as excerpt 8 illustrates.

Excerpt 8

Context: Andrei is being introduced to people on his first day of work. He has just informed them that he did a one year Diploma course at the University of Otago in Dunedin.

1. Con: my family's down in Dunedin
it's a lovely //place I lived there for a while\
3. And: /oh so really I know I know I know\ all Dunedin
4. Cam: mm //[laughs]\ //[laughs]\
5. And: /it's a very small place [laughs]\

6. Con: /it is it's got character though\

7. And: it's become er just () city when I- er when students are gone

8. Con: oh yeah I know I was in the fire service down there

Given that Conrad responds in a friendly way to Andrei by telling him that his family lives in Dunedin, it would seem diplomatic to be careful with comments about the city. But after asserting that, on the basis of a year there, he knows *all Dunedin*, Andrei goes on to describe it as *a very small place*. Conrad responds *it's got character though*, indicating that indeed he does feel positive about the place. While there is nothing inaccurate in what Andrei says – Dunedin is certainly a relatively small place by international standards, his comments appear somewhat critical and negative in the context of his first social conversation in this new workplace. They could also be seen as somewhat self-promoting, implying that Andrei is a man of experience in the world and is accustomed to living in much larger cities. Of course, anyone could make a faux pas of this sort, but it is important to recognise that such apparently irrelevant talk has considerable significance in laying the foundation for smooth (or less smooth) work relationships.

In a similar situation, Helena manages much more successfully from a New Zealander's point of view. After a section of transactional talk, Edward asks her where she lives.

Excerpt 9

Context: The first day of Helena's internship and Edward is explaining the job to her.

1 Edw: how about p cs\two p cs mm three two eight five (4)
do you have a nice (place) where do you go where do you come from
where do you er you where in wellington are you

2. Hel: lower hutt //+ yeah\

3. Edw : /oh okay\

4. Hel: so I catch a train and then I went into the campus
to do some um school work [laughs] [laughs]:

5. Edw: /wow [laughs]\

6. Hel: quickly: walk [laughs] from the railway station
to here um that's okay less than fifteen minutes though
that's really really good walking exercise [laughs]
in the morning what about you where do you //+ live\

7 Edw: /oh\in churton park

8 Hel: churton park so you //+ own your own transport\

9 Edw : /yeah ()\ no I ride a bus

10 Hel : oh yeah ()

11 Edw : um we can't +++ [laughs]

12 Hel : so when you do the offshore one //+\
I think they'll be much more difficult
than this one //+ yeah\

In this short excerpt, Helena not only maintains her end of the small talk appropriately (lines 5-6, 8-11), she also adeptly and considerately returns the interactional baton to Edward after she has made her

contribution (line 12). And, interestingly, she also has the confidence to shift the talk back to transactional matters (their offshore accounts) after an appropriate pause (lines 18-20).

Discussion

Adapting to culturally different organisations provides many challenges for new migrants, and managing intercultural workplace interaction is often particularly demanding because cultural differences are not always easy to identify. While different ways of undertaking a task tend to be made relatively explicit by colleagues and mentors, different ways of interacting at work tend to be overlooked since they are taken for granted as "normal" and unmarked.

The analyses above suggest that in some areas migrants are interactionally very competent. Both our focus participants managed well with the more technical, task-oriented talk required by their positions. Being professionally competent, they participated effectively in this transactionally oriented discourse, thus implicitly enacting their professional identities in a proficient and capable way. They also participated appropriately in much of the social and small talk in which other engaged them in the course of their working day. This is an area that had been given specific attention in the Communications Skills course in which they were enrolled and the benefits of information about appropriate topics and practice in appropriate ways of responding to small talk were evident in their recorded workplace interactions.

However, as the analysis indicates, there were some areas where interactional problems arose. In the context of enacting professional identity, it was apparent that Andrei's approach was often too explicit and, from a New Zealand perspective, unacceptably self-promotional. Roberts et al (2008) comment that one of the challenges facing members of ethnic minorities who wish to progress in professional work contexts are the differences between their norms and those of the majority group interviewers who hold the key to their promotion. Some minority group members simply assume they are expected to be very direct and explicit concerning their qualifications and expertise in relation to the promotion they are seeking. "Candidates born abroad expect more opportunity to talk explicitly about their different life experiences" Roberts et al. (2008: 5). Those who are explicit and state their qualifications and experience baldly are judged negatively.

"Differences in communicative style mean that this group of candidates are judged either as too 'harsh' or 'emotional' because they do not euphemise their self-presentation or, in contrast, they come across as 'lecturing' and using generalisations because they do not give accounts of themselves as active agents"
(Roberts et al. 2008: 143).

Although their data is based on promotion interviews in Britain, their comments are obviously relevant in interpreting the kind of self-promotional talk in which Andrei engages in his new workplace, as illustrated in excerpt 3 above. The material is presented too bluntly and overtly in relation to the cultural norms of the workplace.

Roberts et al (2008: 143) go on to say: "[candidates] do not blend the discourses of the job interview into a synthesised whole". They need to work them "seamlessly into their overall self-presentation" (Roberts et al 2008: 81). Interestingly this is what Helene manages much more successfully than Andrei, as illustrated in excerpt 4. By introducing her relevant experience incidentally or "by the way" in relation to a current problem, she manages to convey the relevant information in a culturally acceptable way, as judged by New Zealand organisational norms.

The same point applies to social talk. As mentioned above, migrant workers are often bewildered by the way in which social talk is intertwined with transactional talk in New Zealand workplaces. New Zealand colleagues switch easily between discussion of personal matters and task-oriented talk with very little obvious signalling from an outsider's perspective. Note, for example, the switch by Camille to a topic involving her brother in line 27 in excerpt 3, and the switch from work-talk to small talk by Edward in line 2, excerpt 9. This is typical of what Campbell & Roberts (2007), following Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996), identify as the 'new work order' where "the seamless synthesis of personal and work-based identity has to be artfully performed to produce a convincing synthetic personality which embodies certain 'competencies' and dispositions" (Campbell & Roberts 2007: 244-245).). The costs of being

unable to achieve this integration are high. "Where discourses are not blended, the candidate is seen as lacking consistency and credibility and untrustworthy, in other words as inauthentic" (Roberts et al 2008: 87). Yet this synthesis is clearly a real problem for many migrants who are used to keeping their personal and professional identities quite distinct (see also McCallum 2008).

Careful examination of the workplace discourse we have recorded indicates that such switches are generally marked by short pauses as they begin and often also by discourse markers such as *right* or *ok* as the switch back to transactional talk occurs (Marra 2008). But these are subtle signals, and migrant workers need to be alerted to them. From a minority group employee's perspective, the interleaving of social and work-related talk is often very confusing.

Finally, it is worth commenting on the extent to which newcomers are expected to be deferential and submissive when they begin work in a new organisation, regardless of their skills and experience. It takes time to join a new community of practice, and the New Zealand norms require that during that time people observe and respond rather than initiate. Even a new boss will be expected to first learn about the distinctive features of a workplace culture before beginning to throw their weight about. For members of an ethnic minority joining a workplace as an intern, the constraints are even more stringent. Asserting oneself, taking the initiative by asking lots of questions, being critical and dominating the talk time are all unacceptable ways of behaving in this context. Newcomers need to be aware of these norms, since they are different from those in some other cultures where being assertive in a new job context is not only acceptable but respected and admired (Zaldman and Drory 2001; Roberts et al 2008).

Conclusion

Skilled migrants can be regarded as "emissaries for different perspectives", who "have much to offer as catalysts to work group creativity" (Carr 2004: 149). 'Brain waste' and 'broken promises' result when skilled migrants are encouraged to enter New Zealand for work, but are frustrated in attempts to gain employment appropriate to their skills (Carr 2004; Mace, Atkins, Fletcher & Carr 2005). Yet relatively little is done to ease the transition for these professionals from different cultural backgrounds.

This paper has identified some areas of workplace interaction which are potentially problematic for professionals from ethnic minorities faced with the unfamiliar norms of different organisational cultures. The challenge for those wishing to assist them is just how to raise these issues in ways that are constructive and not demeaning. For, as Boxer (2002: 151) notes, although misperceptions are typically two-way, 'the consequences of such a situation are scarcely two-way, because inevitably one group wields societal power at the expense of the other'.

Ideally, skilled migrants should be able to present themselves in a new organisation in ways that accurately convey their professional standing and maintain their dignity. Providing them with information about New Zealand interactional norms is essential so that they do not inadvertently transgress and cause irritation, or even unintended offence. These professionals need to be informed about the costs of flouting workplace interactional norms. On the other hand, those who work alongside them also need to be informed of the different cultural norms of the migrants with whom they are working. In other words, this should be a two-way process. Our ultimate goal is to use our authentic workplace data to educate both sides of the intercultural exchange. Hopefully, the analysis in this paper will provide a valuable contribution to this enterprise, since it identifies some of the subtle ways in which miscommunication may occur and misunderstandings may arise in mundane workplace interaction.

Transcription conventions

[laughs] Paralinguistic features and editorial comments in square brackets

: : Colons indicate start/finish of paralinguistic feature

+ Pause of up to one second

//\, /\ Simultaneous speech

(hello) Transcriber's best guess at an unclear utterance

() Unintelligible utterance

- Incomplete or cut-off utterance

All names used in the examples are pseudonyms

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NOTES

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2 Jackson and Parry (2001: 27) comment that "it would be difficult to find a nation that has institutionalized and ritualized... wealth and envy status" or "lack of reverence for big business" to the extent that Australasians have.

3 See Riddiford (2007), Riddiford and Joe (2005), Newton (2007) and Prebble (2007).

4 See <http://www.vuw.ac.nz/lals/lwp> and Holmes and Stubbe (2003) for further information.

5 In our workplace data, it is those who are in positions of power who typically ask the most direct questions (Holmes and Stubbe 2003, Holmes and Chiles i.p.). Eagly and Carli (2007: 106) also cite research indicating that "Men who conduct meetings usually act like a pitcher, throwing lots of questions at various batters. It's a way of maintaining a dominant position. It's a game that's played".

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