Universität Basel

Research Project

On identities and gender at work: a linguistic case study of agile IT

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While it has been widely acknowledged in academic and practitioner literature that increasing diversity in IT through inclusion of women is an ongoing priority, recent studies of IT workplaces in Europe and the US have found recurrent themes of gender discrimination cutting across different cultural contexts, including Switzerland and the UK (e.g. Schwab et al., 2020). In software development and project management in these contexts, agile ways of working are increasingly becoming the norm (Meyer, 2014). 'Agile' encompasses a number of practices and processes which put an emphasis on facilitating open and frequent communication, empowering teams, reducing hierarchies and foregrounding interpersonal and relational aspects of professional communication. This, in turn, has been argued to reduce (masculine) power structures (Barke, 2015; Boes et al., 2018), yet the field of IT in Euro-Western contexts remains largely male dominated. Furthermore, counter to the importance of communication to agile ways of working (e.g. Hummel et al., 2015), linguistic research on this phenomenon remains scarce, specifically with regard to gender issues. The present study thus takes a linguistic approach to agile ways of working in IT by way of an in-depth qualitative case study of different sociocultural contexts, including Switzerland, the UK, and the US. It deploys frameworks from linguistics at the intersection of discourse analysis, interactional sociolinguistics and identity construction to investigate agile ways of working through a gender lens. The dissertation draws on multiple data sources including over 52 hours of recordings of team and one-to-one meetings from a UK company, and semi-structured interviews with 22 IT professionals from Switzerland, the UK and the US; to explore the intricate relationship between gender, professional and personal identities at the interface of competing gendered discourses in the field of agile IT. Applying and refining current conceptualizations of gender in workplace discourse, the dissertation differentiates between different gender orders to capture the intricate and manifold processes of the gendering of work both in talk *about* work, and talk *at* work. Detailing how gendered practices are enacted and constructed by participants, the project enhances academic understanding of linguistic practices that construct agile IT workplaces as gendered on multiple levels. It thereby contributes to ongoing debates on the gendering of the IT industry specifically, and the gendering of work more globally, which in turn can provide much needed insight into persistent gender inequalities in the field.

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