

Original citation:

Choi, Seongsook and Schnurr, Stephanie. (2016) Enacting and negotiating power relations through teasing in distributed leadership constellations. *Pragmatics & Society*, 7 (3). pp. 482-502.

Permanent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/75256>

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions. Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

This is under copyright and the [Rights & Permissions department](#) of publisher John Benjamins Publishing Company should be contacted for permission to re-use or reprint the material in any form. Link to published article: DOI: [10.1075/ps.7.3.07cho](https://doi.org/10.1075/ps.7.3.07cho)

A note on versions:

The version presented here may differ from the published version or, version of record, if you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the 'permanent WRAP URL' above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk

Enacting and negotiating power relations through teasing in distributed leadership constellations

Seongsook Choi
University of Edinburgh

Stephanie Schnurr
University of Warwick

Corresponding author:

Stephanie Schnurr, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK
Email: s.schnurr@warwick.ac.uk

Brief bio notes:

Seongsook Choi is a Lecturer in TESOL in the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests lie in the areas of professional discourse and the development of analytical tools for mapping interactional patterns and representing these dynamically in visual formats. She is currently researching interdisciplinary talk and writing a research monograph on *Interdisciplinary Discourse: Communicating across Disciplines*, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Stephanie Schnurr is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. Her main research interests are professional and medical communication with a particular focus on leadership discourse. She has published widely on these topics, and her work has appeared, for example, in *Discourse Studies*, *Language in Society*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, and *Journal of Pragmatics*. Stephanie is also the author of *Leadership Discourse at Work. Interactions of Humour, Gender and Workplace Culture* (2009, Palgrave), and *Exploring Professional Communication. Language in Action* (2013, Routledge). She is currently preparing two edited volumes on *Challenging Leadership Stereotypes through Discourse* (with Cornelia Ilie, Springer) and *Identity Struggles. Evidence from Workplaces around the World* (with Dorien van de Mieroop, Benjamins), as well as another research monograph (with O Zayts) on *Language and Culture at Work*.

Enacting and negotiating power relations through teasing in distributed leadership constellations

Abstract

This paper explores how power relations are enacted and negotiated in the largely under-researched non-hierarchical leadership constellation of distributed leadership. Drawing on more than 300 hours of audio-recorded interactions of a corpus of interdisciplinary research group meetings, we analyse how members of a team that does not have an officially assigned leader or chair regularly draw on teasing thereby enacting and reflecting, as well as sometimes challenging existing power relations. Findings show that the highly ambiguous discursive strategy of teasing enables all members, regardless of their official role or position, to contribute to the team's leadership performance. However, findings also show that although teasing has the potential to facilitate more collaborative approaches to leadership, the ways in which power is actually enacted in our data resembles more traditional hierarchical leadership constellations.

Keywords: distributed leadership, teasing, power, leadership discourse, humour, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

1. *Introduction*

This paper aims to explore how power relations are enacted and negotiated through teasing in the non-traditional and relatively non-hierarchical leadership constellation of distributed leadership. The research reported here builds on and elaborates our earlier research on leadership and teasing in traditional top-down leadership constellations (e.g. Schnurr 2009a, b; Schnurr & Chan 2011b) and thus provides further insights into the complex relationship of leadership, power and humour.

As a consequence of the “new work order” (Gee et al. 1996) and other ideological changes which have taken place (and some are still taking place) in many workplaces around the world, a tendency has emerged to re-form organisational hierarchies into flatter, more horizontal structures with fewer levels of management which put more emphasis on team responsibility (Gunnarsson 2009; Barker 1999). As a consequence of these changes and tendencies, power relations and role-relationships between organisational members are also changing and are increasingly moving away from strictly hierarchical structures characterised by distinct power asymmetries towards allegedly more collaborative and inclusive approaches which put an emphasis on empowerment rather than a coercive exercise of power. However, as Barker (1993: 411) maintains, these changes have given rise to a new form of control, namely concertive control in which the locus of the exercising control has shifted from management onto the team who develops and organizes means of controlling themselves and each other. These ideological and structural changes have also affected leadership dynamics, and non-traditional, more inclusive forms of leadership are increasingly finding their way into many organisations. This paper focuses on exploring one of these non-traditional forms of leadership, namely distributed leadership.

Distributed leadership describes those constellations in which teams lead their work “collectively and independently of formal leaders” (Vine et al. 2008: 341). Thus, rather than relying on an officially assigned leader or chair to do “the leading” (for example, in the form of decision making, agenda setting etc), in distributed leadership, the various activities typically associated with leadership are conjointly performed among team members who are often on the same hierarchical level within their organisation (see also Choi & Schnurr 2014; Day et al. 2004; Gronn 2002; Nielsen 2004).

However, in spite of the increasing popularity of these non-traditional leadership constellations, there is only very little linguistic research that explores how leadership is actually done in teams where the leadership performance is shared (e.g. Schnurr & Chan 2011a; Vine et al. 2009 for co-leadership; and Choi & Schnurr 2014 for distributed leadership). In an earlier paper we have described how a team that does not have an officially assigned leader or chair negotiates disagreements and reaches consensus (Choi & Schnurr 2014). We observed that the leadership activities in this team were distributed among various team members and different individuals took on a leadership role at different points throughout the meeting. We argued that although this team was “leaderless” in the sense that it does not have an officially assigned chair or leader, there was a lot of *leadership* taking place.

But what is leadership? Although there is little agreement among scholars as to what exactly leadership is (e.g. Alvesson & Spicer 2012; Grint 2005), most recent approaches tend to conceptualise leadership as a process or an activity (rather than as a list of attributes) that is

conjointly enacted by various participants (e.g. Day et al 2004; Gronn 2002; Heenan & Bennis 1999; Jackson & Parry 2008). Most discourse analytic studies of leadership follow the definition by Holmes et al. (2003) who describe leadership discourse as a combination of transactional and relational behaviours. Transactional behaviours include a wide range of activities that primarily aim at getting things done, solving problems and achieving particular goals, while relational behaviours focus on creating and maintaining a productive working atmosphere and establishing collegiality among team members. Both transactional and relational behaviours constitute integral aspects of leadership performance (e.g. Ferch & Mitchell 2001), and are typically combined in traditional as well as non-traditional leadership constellations. However, the specific ways in which they are enacted differ across teams and are closely linked to the power relations among team members.

1.1. *Power*

We take a post-structuralist stance and understand power not as a fixed attribute attached to certain roles and positions but as being dynamically enacted and negotiated in interaction. Thus, rather than defining it in traditional terms as the ability to influence the behaviour of someone else, we view power as “a systemic characteristic” (Fletcher 1999: 16) and as “a complex and continuously evolving web of social and discursive relations” which influences all social interactions (Foucault 1980; Thornborrow 2002: 7). In a professional context, power relations are omni-present although they may be manifested in different ways (Holmes & Stubbe 2003: 3). More specifically, power at work is manifested and enacted in a complex web of relationships and realities, which may not always be overtly recognisable and may not be linked to role relationships and hierarchical structures.

These changes are also reflected on the level of discourse where they have been described as a “democratisation” of discourse (Fairclough 1992: 201). Effects of this democratisation of discourse are manifested, for example, in a decrease of overt power markers and a tendency towards more informal language. As a consequence, professional discourse is becoming increasingly more informal and tends to resemble discourse that occurs in the private domain. This tendency is also referred to as “conversationalisation” of discourse (Fairclough 1992: 8).

However, in spite of these apparently equalising tendencies, power is still exercised in and through discourse – albeit often in more subtle and hidden ways which sometimes take place below an easily observable surface. More specifically, these tendencies towards exercising power more subtly are reflected on the micro-level of interaction. Our focus in this paper is thus how power relations are reflected and enacted, as well as sometimes challenged, in the interactions of members of a team that does not have an officially assigned chair or leader. We are particularly interested in how this is achieved through teasing.

1.2. *Teasing*

Previous research has established that one of the discursive strategies used to do power and leadership is humour (e.g. Holmes 2006, 2007; Schnurr 2009a, b). Leaders across different workplaces and different socio-cultural contexts have been observed to employ humour to assist them in a range of transactional and relational leadership behaviours, including getting things done, motivating others, communicating negative messages and criticising others, as well as building workplace culture and creating a sense of belonging among team members (e.g. Holmes 2007; Rogerson-Revell 2007, 2011; Schnurr 2008,

2009a; Schnurr & Chan 2009). It has even been claimed that humour is a leadership tool par excellence. These various benefits of humour for the performance of leadership are also related to the exercise of power. More specifically, due to its ability to function “as a bouquet, a shield, and a cloak, as well as an incisive weapon in the armoury of the oppressed” (Holmes, 1998), humour seems to be particularly suitable to negotiate power relations while simultaneously expressing solidarity among interlocutors. It thus enables interlocutors to do power and to perform a wide range of behaviours associated with power, such as decision making and giving directives, while at the same time creating a positive atmosphere by downplaying and perhaps even disguising this exercise of power (e.g. Schnurr 2009b). Humour is thus a prime means to mediate between the discourses of power and solidarity which prevail in workplace contexts (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003: 117).

This ability is particularly true for teasing which is an inherently ambiguous strategy and which may simultaneously convey and create solidarity among interlocutors as well as display power and control (Boxer & Cortés-Conde 1997; Eisenberg, 1986; Schnurr 2009a).

Teasing is often defined as an utterance in which the speaker expresses “a potentially insulting/aggressive comment but simultaneously provides/relies upon cues that the utterance is to be understood as playful/nonserious” (Alberts, 1992, 155). Due to this ambiguity, teasing – perhaps more so than other types of humour – enables the speaker to convey two contradictory messages and to perform different functions. On the one hand, it may contribute towards creating a sense of solidarity (i.e. teasing usually occurs among people who have established a relatively strong relationship (e.g. Hay 1994), especially in a workplace context (Daly et al. 2004; Schnurr & Chan 2011)), but on the other hand, it may

also function as a tool to display and enact power (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997; Eisenberg, 1986; Schnurr 2009a).

In order to account for the different ways of doing teasing, Boxer & Cortés-Conde (1997) propose a continuum along which various teasing styles (see also Schnurr 2009a) are located. Their continuum ranges from 'bonding' to 'nipping' to 'biting' with 'biting' referring to relatively aggressive and challenging instances of teasing, while 'bonding' describes teasing which primarily aims at reinforcing solidarity and emphasising common ground. As our analyses below illustrate, these teasing styles do not constitute distinct categories with clear-cut boundaries but rather merge into each other, and some instances of teasing may combine elements of different styles.

Teasing, like humour in general, is thus a powerful strategy that enables interlocutors to perform activities that are indexed for power, such as getting things done and criticising others, while at the same time minimising the potential threat of such behaviour. These activities, in turn, are also indexed for leadership performance. And as we have illustrated elsewhere (e.g. Schnurr 2009a), teasing is indeed one of the discursive strategies that people regularly draw on when doing leadership. Moreover, teasing also enables less powerful participants to *do* power, for example by expressing a serious and potentially threatening message in relatively 'safe' ways as they can always claim that the message was meant to be interpreted non-seriously and that they were 'just kidding'. Teasing is thus not only an excellent strategy to do power in more subtle ways and to challenge existing power relations and subvert the status quo, but it can also be used to assist those in lower hierarchical positions to get their voices heard and to participate in the performance of

leadership. This inherent ambiguity and complexity makes teasing a fascinating topic of enquiry; it is this close link between teasing, power, and leadership that our research, as reported in the present paper, is primarily interested in.

2. *Data and approach*

In order to explore this complex relationship and to analyse the ways in which power is enacted through teasing among the members of a distributed leadership team we draw on a corpus of more than 300 hours of audio-recorded meetings of different interdisciplinary scientific research groups, including large collaborative research projects as well as interdisciplinary PhD supervision meetings. Participants come from various academic disciplines, including mathematics, statistics, bioinformatics, medicine and biology, and they involve academics and students in different career stages, ranging from PhD student to full professor. The meetings that we have recorded lasted for up to eight hours.

Data were recorded by two audio recorders which were set up in the room before the start of a meeting, and the researcher sat in an unobtrusive corner during the recording. We recorded everything that was said from the moment participants entered the room until they left. We were thus able to not only record the actual meeting but also pre- and post-meeting talk. Data were transcribed and anonymised according to the CA standards established by Jefferson (2004), but conventional orthography was used wherever possible and the transcription of laughter is more crudely represented than is standard in CA.

These primary data are supplemented by semi-structured interviews with participants after the meetings and observation notes taken during the meetings. For example, observations

relating to the seating arrangement and atypical occurrences such as acts or gestures that are not usually found in previous meetings were included in comprehensive field notes.

Although we are aware of the potential pitfalls associated with the researcher's presence during the recording, participants in our data consistently ignored her presence once the meeting had started and did not usually interact with her but focused on the purpose and agenda of their meeting (see also Mullany 2007; Baxter 2010).

In this paper, we draw on data from the regular meetings of an interdisciplinary research project team whose members come from different disciplines including mathematics, statistics, biology and bio-informatics. At the time of recording they had been working together for 1.5 years on a three-year research project. The team consists of Ylva, the principle investigator who is an associate professor in biology, and three co-investigators: Dan, a mathematics professor, Bee, a statistics associate professor, and Paul, a bio-informatics associate professor. Mary and Sarah who also participated in the meetings are two postdoctoral researchers from biology and mathematics, respectively. And although from the outset, it could be assumed that a certain level of hierarchical relationships exists in this team, we have shown in our earlier research that the role-relationships between members are not strictly hierarchical and characterised by distinct status asymmetries – rather, in their everyday interactions with each other, potential differences in status, role or seniority are blurred and do not seem to play a crucial role for example in decision making and solving disagreements (cf. Choi & Schnurr 2014).

In our analyses below, we use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to approach these data and to explore the ways in which power relations are enacted, maintained and sometimes

challenged through teasing among the members of a team that does not have an officially assigned chair or leader and which is characterised by supposedly flat (rather than hierarchical) structures.

CDA has been described as “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk 2001: 352). It is thus particularly useful for an investigation of how power is enacted, reinforced as well as challenged in various subtle ways in a workplace context. In workplaces, where power in its various forms and disguises is omni-present, CDA provides a useful tool to explore some of the processes through which power relations are actually constructed, enacted and sometimes questioned and challenged.

We are particularly interested in exploring whether these processes of doing power actually create and reinforce the ideology of equality and empowerment that distributed leadership constellations seem to propagate. Embracing CDA, we also view discourse as “a form of social practice” (Fairclough 1995: 7) through which certain realities are being created; and we acknowledge that discourse is the most influential factor in producing and reproducing power relations and their underlying ideologies. In our analysis of authentic workplace discourse below we thus aim to identify and expose some of the ways in which power is enacted (and by whom) and to what effect and what this means in terms of who is doing and contributing to the performance of leadership in this ‘leaderless’ team.

3. *Analysis*

We have chosen five examples here that are representative of the ways in which team members use teasing in their regular meetings. The focus of the analysis is the processes through which team members manage the competing discourses of power and solidarity, and more interestingly, what this means in terms of the team's leadership performance. We first discuss one example to illustrate how teasing is used between colleagues to do solidarity and to enact collegiality (albeit with a slightly critical edge), before discussing in more detail how teasing is used to do power – assisting interlocutors in maintaining as well as challenging power relations and the status quo.

3.1. Doing solidarity and collegiality

One of the basic functions of all instances of humour is to reinforce solidarity (Holmes 2000). This also seems to apply to teasing, although this particular type of humour always to some extent conveys a critical message. However, the degree to which this critical edge is foregrounded in a teasing instance varies. Example 1 is typical of those instances in our data where the main emphasis seems to be on performing relational aspects, such as doing collegiality and enacting solidarity among team members. We have highlighted the teasing in all examples in bold.

Example 1

Context: This example occurred during one of the team's regular meetings. Participants are discussing the possibility of running another experiment. Dan is showing a particular interest in the financial aspect of the project.

- 1 DAN how much does erm how much do microarrays cost
- 2 SARAH erm (4.0)
- 3 YLVA it's probably four thousand pounds for the experiment isn't it yeah erm
- 4 DAN well what does that work out per per microarray
- 5 YLVA I can't remember off the top of my head right now. erm these were the
6. cheaper erm
- 7 BEE **what are you looking to give us some money**
- 8 DAN **((smiling tone of voice)) no I haven't got any money**
- 9 ALL **[laugh]**
- 10 DAN no I was just wondering I'm its erm because erm (6.0)
- 11 SARAH so I have some data but I mean it's just an excel spreadsheet for now
(17.0)

The extract is embedded in a longer discussion between team members about the financial aspects of the project. During this discussion Dan repeatedly criticised Ylva's suggestions of how to spend the project's money. Throughout the meetings that we have recorded, Dan regularly challenges the results of the experiments, as a result of which the Biology team often end up having to run more experiments than anticipated thus exhausting the project's money. Against this background then, Bee's teasing of Dan for his interest in the project can be interpreted as a criticism of Dan and as support and perhaps even defence of Ylva as it shifts the attention away from Ylva (and her current lack of the details of the costs involved in running a particular experiment) towards Dan. Through her use of the pronoun '*you*' (line 7) Bee directly targets Dan and selects him as the next speaker; and by referring to herself,

Ylva and the rest of the team as '*we*', she also creates an *us* versus *you* dichotomy which further enhances the creation of solidarity between herself and Ylva.

Moreover, Bee's teasing remark could also be interpreted as an attempt to get more money for the project from Dan, who is in an influential position to be able to generate further funding. Dan realises this and manages to wriggle out by using a smiling voice and stating that he does not have any money (line 8). So Bee's teasing in line 7 serves to quite subtly criticise and challenge Dan in a number of respects while at the same time reinforcing solidarity within the team. This is further evidenced by the joint laughter in line 9 that shows the team is aware of the full intention of Bee and the potential 'predicament' Dan inadvertently put himself into.

Through her teasing, Bee thus manages to create solidarity between herself and Ylva while at the same time criticising Dan and steering the discussion towards another topic (see Sarah's comment in line 11 which moves participants' discussion towards discussing the data that their previous experiments have generated and how to make the most of them). Although her comment has a critical edge to it (cf. the utterance initial '*what*' (line 7)), judging by Bee's tone of voice, it is meant friendly and its main function seems to be to reinforce solidarity among interlocutors. This effect is further enhanced by Dan's response which is uttered in a smiling tone of voice (line 8) and the subsequent joint laughter that this little exchange triggers from various team members (line 9). The style of this teasing could thus be described as nipping as it is partly supportive and partly contestive (Boxer & Cortes-Conde 1997; Schnurr 2009a). The joint laughter in particular, that occurs after the teasing, and the fact that Dan plays along rather than challenges Bee, make this teasing style

'nipping' rather than the more aggressive and challenging style of 'biting'. Interestingly, there were no instances of 'biting' teasing in the data that we recorded for this team, which indicates that the team's discursive repertoire is generally collaborative and friendly, and that even in times of conflict or disagreement team members adhere to these communicative norms and do not generally challenge each other in potentially threatening ways (see also our analyses of the examples below and Choi & Schnurr (2014) for further evidence).

In addition to those teasing instances where relational functions are foregrounded, another function of the teasing in our data was to maintain status differences and reinforce the status quo. The majority of teasing examples that we identified in our data fall into this category.

3.2. Maintaining status differences and reinforcing the status quo

Most of the teasing examples whose primary function is to maintain existing power relations and reinforce the status quo, were uttered by more senior team members to criticise their junior colleagues or to utter a critical remark about their performance. Due to their prominence in our data set, we include two examples here.

Example 2

Context: During the same meeting as Example 1. Participants are discussing how to interpret a particular transcript of a biology experiment that Mary has conducted. Participants are discussing what the results of the experiment indicate.

1. YLVA she's got a (xxx) transcription factor the (xxx) I think are both interesting to
2. figure out where they go (0.1) the XYX I can't I can't remember why I asked

3. her to look at it but I think it's to check the ABCD target genes because
4. SARAH yeah it might [be yeah yeah yeah]
5. YLVA [it might be one of the] ABCD target genes [laughs]
6. MARY for some reason I couldn't work out why because it's an interesting
7. result
8. YLVA [laughs] I did tell her at the time but she didn't take note of it
9. MARY she just did it
10. SARAH no isn't it just it seems to be the same spots that I mean it's the same
11. binding sites that show up to be more sort of because in her analysis
12. as well it's also that
13. YLVA well you would hope that to happen right

The teasing occurs here as a response to Mary's self-deprecating and slightly humorous confession that she '*couldn't work out*' the reason for a particularly interesting result that one of the experiments has shown. Ylva's teasing remark '*I did tell her at the time but she didn't take note of it*' (line 8) is particularly humorous because of her use of pronouns: she is using the third person singular '*she*' when talking about Mary to the others in the room as though Mary were not present. This comment, although considerably mitigated by Ylva's utterance initial laughter (line 8), also has a critical edge to it as it conveys a criticism of Mary not listening to Ylva's earlier instructions. Like in Example 1, the teasing is uttered in a 'nipping' style which indicates that this may be the team's preferred style of teasing (see also Example 4).

Mary seems to play along with the teasing, namely by adapting Ylva's choice of pronouns and referring to herself in the third person singular '*she*' as if she were talking about a third person (line 9). However, the humour is not picked up by anyone else and so comes to an end when Sarah continues with the research related discussion which went on before the teasing sequence (line 10).

What is particularly interesting about this example is how the teasing assists Ylva in doing leadership. It allows her to express her criticism of Mary (which can be interpreted as an act of doing power) while still maintaining harmony within the team and a good collegial relationship with her postdoc. Eventually she thus ensures that everyone does their job properly, which ultimately contributes to advancing the project in a way that is less threatening to her junior colleague Mary than if the criticism were uttered without the humour. The teasing thus enables Ylva to combine transactional objectives (i.e. making sure everyone performs their job appropriately and effectively) and relational functions which is further supported by her laughter. And judged by Mary's response of playing along with the humour while at the same time justifying herself, it seems that Ylva has achieved these two leadership objectives.

The next example also illustrates how teasing is often used to maintain status differences among participants and to reinforce the status quo.

Example 3

Context: During another meeting of the same team. Bee, the statistical expert, gives a formula to Mary, the biology postdoc, to produce a plot for the growth rate of a particular gene.

1. BEE I think with those plots that might be quite a good thing to look at erm like
2. for instance in the left plot that should be very clear that it's got very high
3. growth rate on the erm in you know the erm whereas the other one is much
4. much lower growth rate
5. MARY ok yeah that might be clearer yeah
6. BEE and then when it goes negative you can also see when when its
7. YLVA you would have to show both types of plot in the graph
8. BEE yes but erm it might help erm [to see things]
9. MARY [the analysis] ok
10. BEE they sometimes look quite different.
11. MARY I can imagine
12. YLVA and it's really the growth rate which is relevant here right because yeah
13. BEE yeah
14. MARY yeah
15. YLVA to look at when the repression is active
16. BEE yeah (6.0)
17. YLVA I think it's a nice idea
18. BEE so it's the value of time point t minus the value of time point t minus one
19. divided by the value of t minus one.
20. ((various participants smile during Bee's previous utterance))
21. MARY [laughs]

22. YLVA ((smiling tone of voice)) can you cope [laughs]
23. ((several participants smile))
24. MARY you can imagine what the little diagram looks like yep I think I get that yep no
25. makes sense if the graphs don't look right I'll do them again ok cool

Ylva's teasing of Mary is embedded in a relatively long and explicit sequence of explanations about what to look out for in a particular experiment and how to interpret the observations.

When Bee provides Mary (who is the one to do the experiment) with the mathematical formula which she needs to apply to make sense of the results (lines 18-19), Mary responds with laughter (line 21). Laughter is a highly ambiguous strategy (Glenn 2003) and could thus carry several meanings (sometimes even simultaneously). However, in this instance, Ylva seems to interpret it as an expression of Mary's uncertainty. She thus makes sure that Mary understands the formula and knows what she is supposed to be doing by uttering the teasing comment '*can you cope*' (line 22). As in the previous example, her smiling voice and subsequent laughter (line 22) mark this comment as humorous and further mitigate its illocutionary force. Ylva's teasing can be understood as a continuation and reinforcement of Bee's earlier portrayal of Mary (a biologist) as knowing very little about mathematics (e.g. lines 1, 6 and 10). This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Bee's spelling out of the formula is responded to with lots of smiles from various participants (line 23). Ylva's teasing is also responded to by smiling from other participants (including Mary) (line 21).

This style of teasing could be described as bonding. According to Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997: 276), the main function of 'bonding' teasing is not to challenge or divide interlocutors but rather to emphasise common ground and reinforce solidarity. However, the teasing,

nevertheless, has a slightly critical edge as it also entails the option for (in this case probably a rather mild) criticism. Ylva's teasing (in a smiling voice) and her subsequent laughter can also be interpreted as a 'hidden' exercise of power as it enables her to wrap her critical message in humour and thus to disguise her critical intension by reinforcing solidarity. Like in the previous examples, the teasing assists the speaker (here Ylva) in her leadership performance as it supports her to achieve her transactional objectives (i.e. ensuring that Mary knows what she needs to do and checking if she needs some help, which will ultimately contribute to ensuring the successful completion of the research for the project) while at the same time performing relational behaviours (i.e. maintaining harmony within the team by making sure that Mary feels able to do what is expected from her (namely to apply the mathematical formula to the data) and giving her the opportunity to voice her concerns). Judging by Mary's response to the teasing, Ylva's leadership is successful: with her response Mary reassures everyone that she '*get[s] that yep no makes sense*' and that she knows indeed what to do '*if the graphs don't look right I'll do them again ok cool*' (line 25).

The observation that most of the teasing instances in our data were used to maintain status differences and to reinforce the status quo is particularly interesting since this seems to intuitively contradict the ideologies of equality, collaboration and sharing of power that underlie distributed leadership constellations. This aspect is discussed in more detail in the discussion section at the end of the paper.

3.3. Challenging power relations and the status quo

There was also some evidence in the data of attempts by junior team members to utilise teasing to challenge existing power relations and to make sure their voices and opinions are

being heard by the more senior members. Example 4 is a good illustration of this function of teasing in our data.

Example 4

Context: During the same meeting. Mary is presenting the results of an experiment that she has conducted. During her presentation she gets frequently interrupted by the other team members.

1. DAN but didn't anyone ever just truncate that end of the promoter.
2. YLVA yes so I think that's what she's doing
3. MARY [laughs] ok so again
4. PAUL can you just show the previous slide again.
5. **MARY you're not letting me get to my good result [laughs]**
6. ANNE (xxx) understanding things
7. PAUL so for the one two it was all for the 5A mutations second and third from the
8. left they're different results aren't they
9. MARY which ones sorry
10. PAUL the second and third from the left on the left hand graph.

The beginning of this excerpt shows Mary's struggle to re-gain the floor in the midst of her colleagues' interruptions. In particular, her attempt to steer participants back to her presentation (line 3), which follows Ylva's rephrasing and Mary's earlier elaborations, remains unsuccessful. Rather than letting Mary continue, Paul requests to see the previous slide again (line 4). In this context, then, Mary's teasing comment '*you're not letting me get to*

my good result (line 5) could be interpreted as an expression of her frustration and criticism of the other, more senior, team members for constantly interrupting her before she has had the opportunity to finish her presentation and explanations. Mary's attempts to get her say here is, at least partly, successful as Paul subsequently addresses his questions directly at Mary and so creates the opportunity for her to explain the experiment and its results (lines 7-8).

Like in the previous examples, the style of this teasing could also be described as 'nipping': albeit performing critical and potentially face-threatening functions, the teasing is firmly embedded in the previous discussion, and it is mitigated by some laughter (Schnurr 2009a). It clearly has an edge to it albeit being softened by Mary's turn-final laughter (line 5). This mitigation seems crucial especially since Mary is criticising her more senior colleagues here (to whom she directly reports) which could be interpreted as an attempt at doing power, which, however, is disguised as friendly banter. Through the teasing, Mary makes an attempt to get her voice heard and to contribute to the team's decision making and sense making processes. Her teasing comment could thus be interpreted as assisting her in making a contribution to these leadership activities. Making sure she is getting heard and her explanations are valued and taken into consideration is particularly important for the overall success of the project. This is successful in so far as she gets to finish her presentation and thereby contribute to the team's discussion and sense making (see lines 3-5).

The next example is perhaps the most complex one of all the examples that we discuss here. It shows a relatively long sequence of joint humour which includes several teasing instances uttered by various team members to perform different functions. We include this

example at the end of our analysis section as it nicely illustrates how several of the functions discussed above may be combined within a teasing sequence.

Example 5

Context: Team members are making fun of the very well-equipped laboratory of one of their colleagues from another university. At a recent conference, that other colleague showed a picture of his laboratory with several robots in it.

1. DAN I mean heaven knows whether those pictures he showed were really his stuff
yeah it's just loads of robots going
2. BEE they're all made of (xxx) take a picture of us (xxx)
3. SARAH that will be your robots
4. DAN yes we'll just line the post docs up [laughs]
5. YLVA I think Mary and Susan they would be the best two [laughs]
6. DAN [laughs]
7. MARY basically yeah
8. DAN we could put them in boxes we can make little boxes you know like kids
9. MARY with a smiley face on
10. DAN yeah [laughs]
11. YLVA [laughs]
12. MARY ((laughing tone of voice)) these are our robots [laughs]
13. BEE [laughs] (xxx) [laughs]
14. YLVA [laughs] (xxx) [laughs]

In this relatively long humour sequence, we can identify several teasing instances: the first teasing is initiated by Sarah in line 3 when she teases Dan for being envious of his colleague's robots (see line 1 and previous discussion not shown here). The teasing is then picked up by Dan who in turn teases Sarah (and by implication Mary, the other postdoctoral researcher) back. This teasing is elaborated by Ylva who directs it very explicitly at Mary and Susan (who is another postdoctoral researcher who does not work on this project but who shares a laboratory with Mary) (line 5). The main function of this teasing exchange is to reinforce solidarity and do collegiality among team members. It is delivered in a bonding style as interlocutors' agreement (e.g. Dan's 'yes' in line 4), the overall friendly and supportive tone of voice and the frequent joint laughter indicate.

After some more laughter by Dan (line 6) and a minimal agreement by Mary, this initial teasing sequence is then followed by a teasing exchange between Dan and Mary. Dan continues the humorous topic of using the postdoctoral researchers as robots but suggests hiding them underneath '*little boxes*' to make them look even more like robots (line 8). Mary, one of the postdocs who has been put forward as someone who should be used to impersonate one of these robots, plays along by humorously suggesting to paint '*smiley face[s]*' on the boxes (line 9). This comment triggers more laughter and agreement from participants (lines 10 and 11), as does Mary's final remark about these being '*our robots*' (line 12).

Although on the surface level, this appears to be a friendly exchange between colleagues with the main function of reinforcing solidarity and expressing a feeling of belonging to the team (especially when set up in contrast to that other person from another university), upon

closer scrutiny it seems that at least two of the teasing instances also have a critical edge. In particular, Dan and Ylva's teasing of the postdocs could also be interpreted as an exercise of power and an attempt to maintain the status quo. More specifically, since their suggestions of using the more junior postdocs as their robots comes after Bee's original suggestion to '*take a picture of us*' ('*us*' here presumably referring to all team members) (line 2) to show who is working on this project. With their teasing, Dan and Ylva thus manage to shift the focus away from the inclusive '*us*' to a more specific '*the postdocs*' and later even '*Mary and Susan*', thereby setting up the postdocs as '*the best two*' robots (i.e. as those doing most of the easy labour).

This interpretation is further supported by Mary's final teasing remark about these being '*our*' (rather than '*your*') robots (line 12). With her choice of pronouns (and an emphasis on '*our*') she reminds all team members that this is actually a collaborative project and that they are all a part of this. Read in this way, her comment would follow up and to a certain extent challenge Sarah's earlier remark about the postdocs being '*your*' (i.e. Dan's) robots (line 3).

This teasing could thus be described as 'nipping', which is further supported by Mary's laughing tone of voice in line 12. Like Example 4, Mary's last remark is thus a good illustration of how teasing may be used by relatively junior members to do power and to challenge the status quo. Since the critical message is wrapped in humour and further mitigated by laughter (line 12), the teasing enables Mary to get her critical message across without unnecessarily offending her colleagues (and in this case, superiors). As the subsequent laughter by Bee and Ylva shows, Mary manages to do this successfully.

4. Discussion

Our analyses of the ways in which members of this distributed leadership team do leadership and power through their use of teasing has confirmed our initial assumptions that in this non-traditional constellation leadership is indeed collaboratively performed (see also Choi & Schnurr 2014). More specifically, as our examples have shown, participants regularly draw on teasing to assist them in performing transactional and relational leadership behaviours, including ensuring people's compliance (Example 2), making sure people know what they need to do and checking if they need help (Example 3), as well as creating and maintaining solidarity and doing collegiality (Examples 1 and 5). The observation that several people participate in these activities seems to indicate that the performance of power and leadership in this team correspond to and reflect the expectations and promises associated with the non-traditional and non-hierarchical constellation of distributed leadership. Not only did the teasing enable team members of different status to contribute to an ongoing discussion, but it was also used by relatively junior participants (who would traditionally be described as relatively 'powerless') to do power and to get their voices heard.

However, upon closer scrutiny of the examples, it becomes apparent that although teasing clearly has the potential to give a voice to the less powerful (e.g. Examples 4 and 5), in our data, most instances were initiated by more senior members (e.g. professors and Co-PIs rather than postdoctoral researchers). The overall trend thus seems to be that teasing is primarily used to reinforce status differences and the status quo rather than to challenge existing power relations. These observations, however, contradict the ideologies of equality, collaboration and sharing of power that inform the constellation of distributed leadership.

Indeed, when we compare these observations regarding this distributed leadership team with our earlier research on traditional top-down leadership constellations (e.g. Schnurr 2009a, b) we find several similarities. In the more hierarchically structured teams that we looked at in our earlier studies, there was also ample evidence of teasing to reinforce solidarity and to do collegiality among members, as well as teasing to maintain and challenge status differences and reinforce the status quo. Like in the examples discussed above, in the other data set we also found examples of leaders teasing subordinates, colleagues teasing each other, as well as relatively junior members teasing more senior participants (including the leaders). Thus, overall, the ways in which power is enacted and negotiated in the distributed leadership team that we have analysed in this paper is not too different from more traditional hierarchical top-down leadership forms.

Based on this comparison, we would thus suggest that rather than claiming that the ways in which power is enacted among the members of the distributed leadership team are typical for this specific leadership constellation, our findings further support the claim that leadership is always to some extent a collaborative activity (e.g. Vine et al. 2008; Jackson and Parry 2008; Choi & Schnurr 2014). And we could thus expect to find some forms of more or less collaborative ways of enacting power and doing leadership in all constellations. As a consequence, different leadership constellations could be usefully conceptualised along a continuum according to the different degrees of collaboration and participation that they encourage among members. At one end of the continuum we would place traditional hierarchical top-down leadership constellations and at the other end, we would agree with Jackson and Parry (2008) and place distributed leadership constellations (as being maximally collaborative and participative).

5. Conclusion

Insights from our study demonstrate the usefulness and importance of approaching leadership from a discursive and pragmatic angle. Not only does such an approach enable researchers to see how leadership is actually performed (see also Choi & Schnurr 2014; Clifton 2006; Svennevig 2008), but it also enables us to critically analyse and question some of the rather grand claims about new, allegedly more egalitarian and collaborative, forms of doing leadership in non-traditional leadership constellations. As our analyses have shown, although there was some evidence in our data of sharing power and doing leadership collaboratively, the overall trends were relatively similar to those observed in earlier studies of more traditional, hierarchical leadership teams – thus providing further evidence for claims that all leadership is (to some extent) a collaborative endeavour.

Although our study was relatively exploratory and has only looked at the performance of one team, we hope that the analytical tools and processes shown here will encourage further research on the specifics of leadership performance in (perhaps other) non-traditional leadership constellations. A focus on these increasingly relevant and yet largely under-researched ways of doing leadership, we believe, would enable research to move away from a focus on leaders towards a better understanding of the processes that inform leadership.

References

- Alberts, Jess. K. 1992. "An inferential/strategic explanation for the social explanation of teases." *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 11 (3): 153–177.
- Alvesson, Mats, and André Spicer. 2012. "Critical leadership studies: The case for critical performativity." *Human Relations* 65 (3): 367-390.
- Barker, James, 1993. Tightening the Iron Cage: Concertive control in self-managing teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38: 408-437.
- Barker, James, 1999. *The Discipline of Teamwork. Participation and Concertive Control*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Baxter, Judith, 2010. *The Language of Female Leadership*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Boxer, Diana, and Florencia Cortés-Conde. 1997. "From bonding to nipping to biting: Conversational joking and identity display." *Journal of Pragmatics* 27 (3): 275-294.
- Clifton, Jonathan. 2006. "A conversation analytical approach to business communication." *Journal of Business Communication* 43 (3): 202–19.
- Choi, Seongsook, and Stephanie Schnurr. 2014. "Exploring distributed leadership. Solving disagreements and negotiating consensus in a 'leaderless' team." *Discourse Studies* 16 (1): 3–24.
- Daly, Nicola, Janet Holmes, Jonathan Newton, and Maria Stubbe. 2004. "Expletives as solidarity signals in FTAs on the factory floor." *Journal of Pragmatics* 36 (5): 945-964.
- Day, David, Peter Gronn, and Eduardo Salas. 2004. "Leadership capacity in teams." *Leadership Quarterly* 15 (6): 857–880.
- Eisenberg, Ann. 1986. "Teasing: Verbal play in two Mexicano homes." In *Language Socialization Across Cultures*, ed. by B. Schieffelin & E. Ochs. 182-198. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical Discourse Analysis*. Boston: Addison Wesley.
- Ferch, Shann, and Matthew Mitchell. 2001. "Intentional Forgiveness in Relational Leadership: A Technique for Enhancing Effective Leadership." *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 7(4): 70-83
- Fletcher, Joyce. 1999. *Disappearing Acts. Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gee, James Paul, Glynda Hull, and Colin Lankshear. 1996. *The New Work Order. Behind the Language of the New Capitalism*. St Leonards: Allen & Unwin.
- Glenn, Phillip. 2003. *Laughter in Interaction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grint, Keith. 2005. *Leadership: Limits and Possibilities (Management, Work and Organisation)*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gronn, Peter. 2002. "Distributed leadership as a unit of analysis." *Leadership Quarterly* 13 (4): 423-451.
- Gunnarsson, Britt-Louise. 2009. *Professional Discourse*. London: Continuum.
- Hay, Jennifer 1994. "Jocular abuse in mixed-group interaction." *Wellington Working Papers in Linguistics* 6: 26 - 55.
- Heenan, David A., and Warren Bennis, 1999. *Co-leaders: The power of great partnerships*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Holmes, Janet. 1998. "Women's talk: The question of sociolinguistic universals." In *Language and Gender. A Reader*. ed. by Jennifer Coates, 461-183. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Holmes, Janet. 2000. "Politeness, power and provocation, How humour functions in the

- workplace." *Discourse Studies* 2 (2): 159 - 185.
- Holmes, Janet. 2006. "Sharing a laugh: pragmatic aspects of humor and gender in the workplace." *Journal of Pragmatics* 38 (1): 26 - 50.
- Holmes, Janet. 2007. "Humour and the construction of Māori leadership at work." *Leadership* 3 (1): 5-27.
- Holmes, Janet, and Maria Stubbe. 2003. *Power and politeness in the workplace: A sociolinguistic analysis of talk at work*. London: Longman.
- Jackson, Brad, and Ken Parry, 2008. *A very short, fairly interesting and reasonably cheap book about studying leadership*. London: Sage publications.
- Jefferson, Gail. 2004. "A note on laughter in 'male-female' interaction." *Discourse Studies* 6 (1): 117-33.
- Mullany, Louise. 2007. *Gendered Discourse in the Professional Workplace*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Nielsen, Jeffrey. 2004. *The Myth of Leadership: Creating Leaderless Organizations*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Davies-Black.
- Rogerson-Revell, Pamela. 2007. "Humour in business: A double-edged sword. A Study of humour and style shifting in intercultural business meetings." *Journal of Pragmatics* 39: 4-28.
- Rogerson-Revell, Pamela. 2011. "Chairing international business meetings: Investigating humour and leadership style in the workplace." In *Constructing Identities at Work*. ed. by Jo Angouri & Meredith Marra, 61-84. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Schnurr, Stephanie. 2008. "Surviving in a man's world with a sense of humour: an analysis of women leaders' use of humour at work." *Leadership* 4 (3): 299-319
- Schnurr, Stephanie. 2009a. "Constructing leader identities through teasing at work." *Journal*

of Pragmatics 41 (6): 1125-1138.

Schnurr, Stephanie 2009b. *Leadership Discourse at Work. Interactions of Humour, Gender and Workplace Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schnurr, Stephanie, and Angela Chan. 2011a. "Exploring another side of co-leadership: Negotiating professional identities through face-work in disagreements." *Language in Society* 40 (2): 187–210.

Schnurr, Stephanie, and Angela Chan. 2011b. "When laughter is not enough. Responding to teasing and self-denigrating humour at work." *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43 (1): 20-35.

Svennevig, Jan. 2008. "Exploring leadership conversations." *Management Communication Quarterly* 21 (4): 529–536.

Thornborrow, Joanna. 2002. *Power Talk. Language and Interaction in Institutional Discourse*. London: Longman.

Van Dijk, Teun. 2001. Critical Discourse Analysis. In *Handbook of Discourse Analysis*. ed. by D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin and H. Hamilton, 352-371. Oxford: Blackwell.

Vine, Bernadette, Janet Holmes, Meredith Marra, Dale Pfeifer, and Brad Jackson. 2008. "Exploring co-leadership talk through Interactional Sociolinguistics." *Leadership* 4 (3): 339–360.

Wenger, Etienne. 1998. *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Acknowledgements

This research was only possible because of the generous assistance given to us by a scientific research group. We are very grateful to all members of this group.

Appendix: Transcription notations

:	sound stretching
[]	overlapping utterances
(.)	micropause, i.e. shorter than (0.5)
(2.0)	pauses in seconds
(xxx)	inaudible word
(yes)	unsure transcription
CAPS	relatively high amplitude
(())	comments of the transcriber
?	rising terminal intonation
.	falling intonation
!	animated tone
=	latching between utterances
[laughs]	laughter
-	abrupt cut-off
<u>underline</u>	speaker's emphasis
<i>Italics</i>	uttered with laughter in voice
CAPS	louder than

About the authors

Seongsook Choi is a Lecturer in TESOL in the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. Her research interests lie in the areas of professional discourse and the development of analytical tools for mapping interactional patterns and representing these dynamically in visual formats. She is currently researching interdisciplinary talk and writing a research monograph on *Interdisciplinary Discourse: Communicating across Disciplines*, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

Stephanie Schnurr is Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. Her main research interests are professional and medical communication with a particular focus on leadership discourse. She has published widely on these topics, and her work has appeared, for example, in *Discourse Studies*, *Language in Society*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, and *Journal of Pragmatics*. Stephanie is also the author of *Leadership Discourse at Work. Interactions of Humour, Gender and Workplace Culture* (2009, Palgrave), and *Exploring Professional Communication. Language in Action* (2013, Routledge). She is currently preparing two edited volumes on *Challenging Leadership Stereotypes through Discourse* (with Cornelia Ilie, Springer) and *Identity Struggles. Evidence from Workplaces around the World* (with Dorien van de Mieroop, Benjamins), as well as another research monograph (with O Zayts) on *Language and Culture at Work*.

Addresses for correspondence

Seongsook Choi
Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, EH8 8AQ, UK
Email: s.choi@ed.ac.uk

Stephanie Schnurr
Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK
Email: s.schnurr@warwick.ac.uk

Corresponding author:

Stephanie Schnurr
Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK
Email: s.schnurr@warwick.ac.uk