Survival or success?
Gendered ways of enacting leadership discourse

Despite female success in the workplace, only 12% of UK plc board directors are women (Sealy, Vinnicombe and Doldor 2010). Past research has studied organisational reasons for the lack of women at leadership level (e.g. maternity leave, childcare, work-life balance), but our study asks whether the use of language may be a determining factor. In male-dominated businesses, do senior women have a harder job than men to be effective through their talk - to be listened to, taken seriously, to influence the views of others effectively, to make key decisions, to create impact? This paper will report on our findings from an ESRC funded research project on gender and the language of leadership in UK senior management meetings. While senior men and women use very similar linguistic strategies to lead their team, one key difference is that women leaders learn to use more “double-voiced discourse” than men: that is, a kind of linguistic “second guessing”. They use their judgement to decide which linguistic strategies (such as humour, politeness, assertiveness, role-breaking) are most appropriate for their audience, purpose and context. For some women, it can be a survival strategy taking time, work and effort, but for a minority, it is a form of linguistic expertise which can lead to career success.