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# **SPEAKING AS WOMEN LEADERS**

Meetings in Middle Eastern  
and Western Contexts

**Judith Baxter and  
Haleema Al A'ali**



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and Western Contexts

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# PREFACE

by Haleema Al A'ali

As a Middle Eastern woman raised in a conservative community with strong views on women and their place in the society, and then later being exposed to western research with its diverse philosophical and ideological roots, my conception of what 'being a woman' means has changed drastically and is still changing. I have shifted from a firm belief that men and women are biologically inclined to speak, act, and feel in a certain way to the realisation that gender is a social category which is enacted and performed at any given time.

In my childhood, I don't recall any specific incident of being mistreated, undervalued or disempowered in my household. If anything, I was the most opinionated and intimidating member of my family. I thought this (women's powerful status in the private sphere) was a crucial aspect which perhaps western scholarship overlooked. I firmly resolved that one day, with the power of research, I would help change the way the international community perceive Middle Eastern women. However, my understanding of 'power' changed over the years as I started thinking about my future. In my rather conservative household, the prospect of work for women was a complicated one. While we were not banned from pursuing careers, we were only allowed to study specialisations which would ultimately lead to specific future jobs that were compatible with 'women's biological nature' and in alignment with their 'natural maternal role' such as teaching and nursing. In fact, I studied English Language and Literature because studying Business or other technical majors was not an option.

I realise now that it is the wider societal discourses that ultimately render women powerless in the region. It is the lack of opportunities; it is

the restrictions created by variable understandings of religious sources in Islam, namely the Quran (God's words) and Hadith (the Prophet's preaching and practices) which are influenced by long-standing cultural values in Arabia, and enforced by a patriarchal society in order to maintain a chaste community where women are burdened with holding the honour and reflecting the identity of a nation. Growing up, I had always heard that women are preservers of our culture, and that a society is as good as the chastity of its women. Honour and chastity are values on which our societies are built. To preserve women, they are guarded in their homes; women are highly respected and revered by society if they observe these traditions.

Yet, Bahraini society nowadays is not the same. There is choice now and the doors have opened up for women to participate in the public sphere, and they have gladly seized the opportunity. During the time of writing this book, the United Arab Emirates has broken long established traditions and taken a courageous decision to appoint five young women (ranging in age from 23 to 38) to be ministers. Such actions have transformed politics for men and women in the region and have brought about change faster than anticipated. A greater role for women in government and working life could be the future of the region and the future of Bahrain. In my Business classes, the vast majority of my students are women. They are studying to enter the workforce and striving to take up managerial positions in the future. In them I see determination and a thirst to compete with their male counterparts. I also see desire for change. Therefore, my ultimate goal for co-writing this book is to give these students of mine and all aspiring Middle Eastern women an opportunity, a voice. Judith and I have a firm belief that research in the language of women's leadership can provide linguistic tools that all women (in the east and the west), when given the opportunity, can use to rise to the top of their professions and become successful leaders. Through research, we aim to present examples of different ways of 'doing leadership' successfully. Leadership is to a great extent subject to the individual context but many features are common across the world. The Middle East with its distinct social, political and economic variables is experiencing a giant cultural leap, and women are in the forefront of this change. We hope this book will bring insights into the ways women lead in a changing global scene and serve as an inspiration at such a pivotal moment in history.

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# Women Leaders in the Middle East and the West

**Abstract** This chapter sets the scene for the rest of the book by presenting its purpose, theoretical framework, the cultural backgrounds to the UK and Bahraini studies, and a review of research literature on women in leadership that has been conducted in those two contexts. Drawing on three Bahraini and three UK case studies of women business leaders, the aim of this book is to explore the ways in which senior women perform leadership within their communities of practice, and to produce insights on the relationship between gender and leadership language within Bahraini and UK cultural contexts.

**Keywords** Leadership • Gender • Communities of practice • Identity • Discourses • Middle East

## INTRODUCTION

Can you guess which of the two senior leadership meetings below is held by a Western European company based in central London, UK, and which is held by a Bahraini company in the Middle East? The following extracts are both taken from the very start of the meeting, each of which was conducted in English and chaired by the leader of the management team:

*Meeting 1: Designing publicity*

*(C=Chair/leader; M=team member; B=team member. There is small talk between members of the meeting for around 5 minutes)*

- 1 C: I think er it's time to start (.) and er everybody<sub>↑</sub> (eye contact with  
 2 all the participants to signal the beginning of the meeting) ah (.) I  
 3 did the er follow-up in the progress er meeting (.) in our er last  
 4 meeting we left with er certain action items (.) and I think the  
 5 designs is one of them (.) er have you looked at it from the PR  
 6 side<sub>↑</sub>?  
 7 M: yeah we have a few comments  
 8 C: can we see them from [er  
 9 M: [you have comments on the er drawings<sub>↑</sub>  
 10 C: yes Mona can we see er (Mona hands her the drawings) (3) now what is  
 11 this for<sub>↑</sub> (.) can we take them one by one<sub>↑</sub>  
 12 B: yeah let's take the invitation first

*Meeting 2: Launching the newsletter*

*(C=Chair/leader; A=team member; B=team member. There is small talk between members of the meeting for around 5 minutes)*

- 1 C: okay (.) shall we start? um let's at the end of each session do what  
 2 we said in terms of saying what communications are out to the rest of  
 3 the company in terms of through the line (.) what goes into the  
 4 newsletter (.)  
 5 anything else we said? what was the third one? newsletter? through  
 6 the line?  
 7 A: team meetings wasn't it?  
 8 C: yeah (.) that's through the line (.)=  
 9 B: =through the line  
 10 C: I thought there was a third? (2) I can't remember (.) we'll see as we  
 11 go anyway and phones on silent (.)=  
 12 A: =er if you've got them =  
 13 C: =if you've  
 14 got them

We imagine you might have some difficulty in deciding which meeting is based in a Bahraini company and which in a UK company. Furthermore, if you were to make a guess at the gender identity of the Chair, we would wager that their gender is not obviously signified by the language used in the extracts. This is not simply because the extracts are too brief to provide sufficient linguistic evidence; sociolinguists can learn a great deal about the identities of speakers from tiny 'contextualisation cues' (Gumperz 1982) supplied in short transcripts of interactional data. More likely, the

reason is that senior meetings in international companies increasingly follow generic patterns. In all probability, you could walk into a leadership meeting anywhere in the world and be able to follow their conventions and processes (Handford 2010). Such conventions often override aspects of cultural and gender identity, and yet such features may be subtly indicated. By conducting a brief analysis of the contextualisation cues in the two extracts, we can see that, in many ways, the interactions of participants are quite similar.

Both meetings begin with the female Chair using a metapragmatic signal to her team to start the meeting. In Meeting 1, the Bahraini leader follows her comment 'it's time to start' with eye contact and use of the inclusive pronoun 'everybody'. In Meeting 2, the UK leader uses the discourse marker 'okay' and follows this with a question to gain people's attention. In Meeting 1, the Bahraini leader supplies some contextual information to locate the purpose of the meeting, while in Meeting 2, the UK leader also helps to orientate her team by saying what she expects the team to achieve. Both leaders set the scene in the space of a minute or so before they use questions to elicit responses from team members. After four or five lines, both leaders then open up discussion to the floor by means of a question. In the first case, the Bahraini leader issues a request and is quickly corrected by a colleague for not noting the answer to the request as it has already been provided to her on the drawings. In the second case, the UK leader has to correct one of her colleagues for not understanding the point behind her request. In both extracts, there are indications that the interaction is driven by the leader but that discussion is open, democratic and purposeful. Overall, each leader combines subtle interactive techniques with a strong sense of business purpose. In both cases, the leader opens their meeting apparently quite effortlessly, concealing the degree of skill it can take to get a team of people who are engaging in small talk to focus instantly on the task in hand (Holmes and Stubbe 2003).

Despite the subtle, generic skills shown by both leaders above, senior management positions for women remain the exception rather than the rule around the world. However, it might be reasonably supposed that certain countries, cultures and institutions support the participation and career progression of senior women more than others. From a western perspective, it might seem that Middle Eastern women leaders face more challenges and barriers than their counterparts in Western Europe. Although women business leaders are in a relatively small minority in

both geographical regions, Western European women appear to be faring better than those in the Middle East. While in the UK, 18% of the top 250 executive positions are currently occupied by women, this figure remains substantially less at 2.2% in the Middle East (Vinnicombe et al. 2015). Furthermore, westerners might associate countries in the Middle East with more traditional views about gender, emanating from the fusion of religion with personal, professional and national constructs of identity (Kelly and Breslin 2010; Metcalfe 2007). Western European women benefit from a range of political, educational and economic legislation that, in principle, supports career opportunities for women. However, we will question such Eurocentric assumptions in our book. Sadaqi (2003) powerfully argues that western perspectives on Middle Eastern women are often stereotyped and that these women are in many ways socially heterogeneous in ways that are under-appreciated by western scholars.

In line with our linguistic analysis of the two meetings above, this book is premised on the constitutive power of leadership language: that is, leaders construct their sense of 'who they are' through the medium of language. Authors from both sociolinguistics (e.g. Holmes 2006; Mullany 2007; Schnurr 2009) and organisation studies (e.g. Alvesson and Karreman 2000; Clifton 2012; Cunliffe 2001; Fairhurst 2007) contend that language is a principal means of constructing people's professional identities. From this perspective, it should be possible to learn whether or not language is gendered in leadership settings, and whether this might have professional and career implications for women. Feminist linguists of a 'postmodern turn' (Cameron 2005: 487) argue that 'discourses' ('ways of seeing the world'; Sunderland 2004: 6) generate gendered expectations of how senior women and men *should* speak and interact, to which individuals often conform, but can resist. This 'discursive' or 'poststructuralist' perspective of leadership identity views language as providing sets of 'resources' or strategies. Accordingly, certain individuals may have greater *access* to these resources than others, depending on approved identity factors such as their age, gender, ethnicity, education, professional status, and so on (see p. 10 below).

In this book, we explore the experience of leadership as performed by six women in senior positions (henceforth, 'senior women') working in international companies based in two different parts of the world: Bahrain