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'We are a small team pretending to be a big one' - Problem solving in family businesses

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Problem solving is at the heart of business activity and has attracted a lot of interest over the years. Although there are several models attempting to capture its stages, recent socio/linguistic work has shown the limitations of conceptualizing organizational problem solving in a linear, step by step way. Problem solving processes are embedded in the context of specific teams and workplace settings and cannot easily be generalized. In this context, the paper focuses on problem solving talk and negotiations of employees' locus of control in small businesses. Special attention is paid to the role of the company's owner.

Although most research on work related problem solving has focused on large or multinational companies, SMEs and family businesses have been characterised as the 'backbone' of European economies. According to the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), SMES constitute 99.9% of all companies and account for 59.8% of employment and 49% of total turnover in the UK. Despite these figures, SMEs are still relatively under researched. Small firms differ from large companies not only in size but also in the way business is done. The most relevant is the well discussed importance of personal relationships. Given the small workforce the roles of senior manager, company director, family member and close friend are often intertwined. Relationships are always relevant to the enactment of talk and research has clearly shown that employees work hard not to damage rapport in their work context. However, in a firm where a small group of employees constitute the whole workforce, individual relationships acquire an increased weight as there are no anonymous structures, no rapid changes in teams' composition, less mobility, no headquarters, no invisible top management and so on.

Against this backdrop, the paper draws on two recently completed projects and focuses on meetings the participants recognise as having primarily a problem solving (PbS) function. The analysis of the data shows that the owner-managers play a key role in this context and claim the privileged position of the centre of problem solving activity. At the same time, roles and relationships are negotiated in the context of the problem solving meeting which shapes and is shaped by the norms of the local context.

Jo Angouri is a Senior Lecturer at the University of the West of England, UK. Her research focus is on discourse in workplace and institutional settings. Jo has published work on, meeting talk in multinational settings, culture and identity and (foreign) language use and language policy in the workplace. Her current work includes a comparative analysis of discourse in business meetings in different workplace contexts. Jo has just completed a project on teamwork and leadership in medical emergencies.