

# Membership categorisation, category-relevant spaces, and perception-in-action: The case of disputes between cyclists and drivers



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## Abstract

This article is concerned with disputes between cyclists and drivers. The analysis describes members' categorisational practices that provide for the seeing of an 'incorrect' use of the road and for the production and relevancy of the context of the disputes (the traffic system). The analysis describes members' *in situ* and *in vivo* accomplishments of (spatial) rights and obligations in and through relational categorisations of road users and objects, their actions, and visually available resources, in relation to the 'proper use of the road' and the gestalt contexture of the common place traffic scene. The article revisits the suggestion of Hester and Francis that the organisation of categorisations in talk may provide technical access to the ways in which members organize the visual perception of the commonplace scene. The article closes by proposing a revised "observers' maxim" that takes in to account the highly indexical nature of observation and categorisation in and as the context in which observations are made.

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## 1. Introduction

This article is concerned with the interactional order of disputes between cyclists and drivers. It focuses on two cases – instances where cyclists feel a motorist has performed a 'close pass' and instances where a driver comes to be telling a cyclist to 'get in the cycle lane'. Specifically, this analysis describes how these traffic disputes turn on the relevancy and accomplishment of mundane technologies<sup>1</sup> of the 'traffic system' (Goffman, 2010[1972]). The disputes are shown to be bound up with members' accomplishments of (spatial) rights and obligations in and through categorisations of road users and objects, their actions, and visually available resources. In this sense, a cycle lane is shown to be an available resource for members' local organisation and accountability of the 'proper' use of the road and, thus, as significant for the categorial relation between cyclists and drivers. Such disputes thus offer a perspicuous setting for the examination of perception and categorisation as organised through and in relation to members' local and occasioned use of categorisational practices (Hester and Eglin, 1997a,b; Watson, 2015) and, specifically, the observer's maxim (Hester and Francis, 2003). Central to these disputes, are members' spatial categorizations – and the procedural consequentiality for the accountability of actions, the viewer's use of norms, and so on. Such practices remain a central yet under-examined aspect of culture-in-action (Hester and Eglin, 1997a). As variously established by

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<sup>1</sup> A useful term, borrowed from Weilenmann et al. (2014).

scholars who have developed this pillar of Sacks' work – and, notably, the late Stephen Hester – categorization practices are central to a wide range of interactional activities and contexts both within and without talk. Yet, as [Watson \(2015\)](#) has recently reminded us, membership categorization analysis (MCA) is often treated as a somewhat narrower concern – focused only upon 'person-descriptions' in talk – and is often loosed from its ethnomethodological moorings. A reconnection or restatement of the centrality of categorization practices to the organisation of situated, practical activities and their context(s) is necessary in realising the contribution of such an attention to current studies of embodied conduct, mobilities, and the development of ethnomethodology more generally. This article thus aims to describe how the selection and recognition of spatial categories ('cycle lane', 'road') is tied to object and membership categories ('bike', 'cyclist', 'car', 'driver') in ways that mirror practices that find actions and predicates to be seeable as 'bound' in the first instance. I conclude by revisiting the observer's maxim in light of the analysis, as an aspect of local categorisational order observable in these disputes and presumably present in a whole range of other situations, through which members handle the mutually constitutive availability and moral order of spatial and membership categories and predicates in and as interactional context.

## 2. Membership categorization, context, and perception-in-action

The reflexive and mutually constitutive relationship between categorisation and context has long featured in studies of MCA ([Hester and Eglin, 1997a,b](#); [Fitzgerald et al., 2009](#); [Greiffenhagen and Watson, 2009](#); [Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002, 2015](#); [Sacks, 1995](#); [Watson, 2015](#)). There remains much to do, however, in terms of the analysis of members' *in vivo* categorisation practices within dynamic, mobile scenes. The 'traffic system' is an apt context for such investigations, not least because it is formally organised around the notion that categories of movers/vehicles *should* move in a particular way within allocated spaces and is furnished with a range of mundane technologies such as traffic, bus and cycle lanes, pavements, other segregated pedestrian walkways, instructional signs and lights, road markings, and so on. What is, however, routinely overlooked by participants and, to some extent, analysts are the categorisation practices and local work in and through which this describable system-ness – as an organisational context where one 'follows the rules' *mutatis mutandis* ([Goffman, 2010\[1972\]](#); [Lee and Watson, 1993](#)) – is accomplished. In this sense, the relevancy and invocation of categories from the 'traffic system collection' serves as an omnirelevant device ([Sacks, 1995\[1\]: 314](#)) in the disputes; that is, a resource for producing these as *traffic* disputes, and the categorisability of participants as 'road users' (in highly indexical ways) and not something else. Categorisations of space and objects are not only constitutive of but endogenous to the lived order of commonplace scenes, exhibit an inexorably local character, and are, as such, central to the interactional accomplishment of the 'traffic system'.

### 2.1. Spatial categorisations

Despite common misconceptions, non-person categories and, indeed, categorisation practices beyond talk have long the concern of studies of membership categorisation ([Hester and Eglin, 1997](#)). Indeed, spatial categorisations received attention in [Sacks' \(1995\)](#) original studies and teachings where, for example, locative and spatial categorisation devices were shown to be a 'neat' resource for the organisation of the telling of stories. Moreover, the selection of spatial categories also displays a reflexive orientation to the hearer, the setting of the event, and the telling ([1995\[2\]: 15](#)). The telling of a wreck on a highway, for example, was shown to orientate to assumedly common knowledge; that is, where the teller and hearer 'normally' are or frequently travel.

This attention to 'place formulations' in talk was, of course, later taken up by [Schegloff \(1972\)](#) in an analysis of members' selection of 'correct' place formulations (informal or geographic) and use of locational and spatial pro-terms ('in', 'there', 'here' and so on). Categorisations were shown to be made in relation to a 'correspondence test' that turned on the relationship between speaker and hearer, their current location, and what the action was at that point in the conversation. Importantly, the first two criteria have to do with members' treatments of 'context'; 'who we are' and 'where we are' are categorial accomplishments. Other analyses have attended to place categories in talk in terms of the accomplishment and display of geographical knowledge in institutional contexts ([Drew, 1978](#); [McHoul and Watson, 1984](#)), focus group and interview talk ([Myers, 2006](#); [Myers and Lampropoulou, 2013](#); [Housley and Smith, 2011](#); [Smith, 2013](#)), and disputes relating to neighbouring and territory ([Stokoe and Wallwork, 2003](#)). The categorisations analysed in these studies can also be seen as producing and displaying the context of the courtroom, the classroom, the interview, or the focus group; they feature what we might call 'distal spatial talk' – that is, talk concerning a setting other than that in which the talk is being produced. The ways in which spatial categorisations feature *in vivo* in mobile scenes remains relatively neglected; few studies have attended to members' spatial categorisations that are regularly and routinely made in everyday interaction and particularly as found in interactions in which members topicalise space and mobility as immediate concerns (for good technical and practical reasons. Exceptions include, [De Stefani and Mondada \(2014\)](#)

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